







TELL JOHN



# TELL JOHN

*The Message of Jesus and  
Present Day Religion*

*By*

GEOFFREY ALLEN

FELLOW AND CHAPLAIN OF LINCOLN COLLEGE, OXFORD

*and*

ROY McKAY

VICAR OF ST. MARK'S CHURCH, LONDONDERRY, BIRMINGHAM

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

*First Published 1932*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY ROBERT MACLENOSE AND CO. LTD.  
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, GLASGOW

## PREFACE

THE writers of the following essays desire to express their gratitude to a group of friends, with whom they met together on three occasions, for their aid in the discussion of much that follows : and also to acknowledge their indebtedness to Karl Barth, and other present leaders of continental theology.

G. F. A.

R. M.





## TELL JOHN

	PAGE
I THE GROWTH OF THE CORN -	3
II THE CORN IS WITHERED - -	37
III FAITH - - - - -	61
IV AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY - - -	89
V THE DEAF HEAR - - - -	113
VI THE BLIND SEE - - - -	141
VII THE DEAD ARE RAISED - -	165
VIII GOOD TIDINGS - - - -	185
IX THE KINGDOM - - - -	201



I

THE GROWTH OF THE CORN

*' Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone ; but if it die, it beareth much fruit.'*

*' I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.'*

*' First the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear.'*



## CHAPTER I

### *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

FIVE phases mark that growth of man in the knowledge of God, which culminates when man knows himself found by God. In any age and in any individual these phases overlap and interlap in strange complexity. The individual, however, normally passes through them ; and in broader outline they may be seen on the page of history, as in succeeding ages a majority of individuals stand arrested in one phase or another of their growth. The analysis of these successive phases may serve to throw light on present religious movements, and on our present discontents.

First there comes the phase of a religion of authority, where religion is accepted at second hand. The inherited wisdom of the ages is set before the child in the form of a system of beliefs or a code of behaviour,

whose

Religion

believed, or a code of ethics to be followed, or a rite which must be performed.

As a stage in education this phase is as right as it is inevitable. There is in the sphere of the knowledge of God and of His dealings with men and of the conduct He requires of men, as in other spheres of knowledge, an inherited wisdom, which must be delivered from one generation to another. It is the honoured task of the Church, considered as a human institution, to see that this work is duly performed.

There are, however, grave dangers and difficulties in this phase, of which perhaps the least is its formalism. It is only the outward form of religious thought and observance which can be passed from man to man ; the inward life of the spirit, which is needed to give to the form its true living content, can only come from within. Without this inward spirit the acceptance of a theory about God takes the place of a living personal trust in God ; a veneer of kindness takes the place of the spontaneity of love ; the formal attend-

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

ance at religious ceremonies takes the place of true worship. As a result, the language which in its first use by the heroes of the faith was full of living content now seems empty and unreal. The vocabulary of theology remains no more than the memorial tombstones of a life which once perhaps was there, but now is there no more.

There is in this phase a sense of restraint. The individual feels himself born free, and held in chains. His allegiance is asked to a belief or a code of behaviour on the authority of the experience of others, not on that of his own reason and conscience.

Despite this sense of restraint, the pride of man is really unbroken, and there is grave danger that the egoism of man is fostered not cured. Only another living person, a 'Thou,' can break through the circle with which each one of us surrounds his own individuality, and can rescue us from an isolated individualism. The authoritative object to which our allegiance is here asked is a theory or a rule, and is as such sub-personal. Theology means at this stage, not that the living God binds me in his service,



## TELL JOHN

but that *I* hold a correct theory about God. Ethics means, not that a living neighbour calls me aside to his service, but that *I* obey a rule of love. To love here means to be a loving person, not to give myself in love to another, and love is denied in the very name of love. The stress on the external belief or rite provides a ready test of behaviour ; using this test I become preoccupied with my own salvation, I measure my progress and suppose myself saved by my own works, and I compare myself with others, to the disadvantage of those who do not follow the same rules. Religion, delivered and received at second hand, becomes something which men can as it were acquire and possess, and the sickness of an acquisitive society penetrates and corrupts the very heart, even of the religious life. The critics are right ; religion as thus practised is an opiate, blinding men to love ; and the worst that the critics say of it will not be more fierce than the language used of such religion by Our Lord.

This first phase is seen as an arrested stage in the religion of the contemporaries of

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

Christ, and it was His opposition to it, and His attack on the comfortable pride which it fostered, which brought Him to the Cross. 'All these commandments have I kept,' the young man could boast; he had many possessions, of which his sense of his own virtue was the chief; but when Christ bid him listen to the cry of a neighbour in need, he went away sorrowing, having never really understood the life to which the commandments pointed.

The religion of external authority lived in Pharisaism, but it did not die with Pharisaism. Wherever the stress is laid on the external authority of book or creed or religious rite as necessary to salvation, there follows inevitably the possibility of formalism, and of a religion of human works, with the taint of an exclusive self-righteousness. It matters not what form it takes:—'I accept the whole Book,' or 'I keep the morning watch,' or 'I attend a Church where the Sacrament is reserved,' or 'I am one of the enlightened who do none of these things,'—there follows latent in the words, and soon deep in the character, and often enough even

## TELL JOHN

attacking, not orthodoxy, but his own earlier immature ideas. The doctrine of the Trinity is perhaps rejected as a somewhat curious attempt to picture the Godhead as three people trying to sit on one throne. The doctrine of the Incarnation is rejected as a strange belief that the most human figure of Jesus was no man, but the gods come down in the likeness of man. The doctrine of the Atonement is rejected as implying an angry God, far less noble in character than Jesus, and for some unaccountable reason requiring the death of Jesus to propitiate Him. Needless to say, if such is the meaning we ascribe to these doctrines, it is far more truly Christian to reject them, than to bend our minds to their acceptance.

In this second phase, the individualism which was latent but in chains under authority is now given free play. Authoritative codes and creeds exist only to be questioned ; the doors are thrown wide for free experiment and free enquiry. Unfettered freedom lies ahead as goal, when the last barriers of remaining traditions have been broken down. In his own free enquiring reason the in-

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

dividual feels that he has the guide, which will lead him forward over every obstacle toward the truth.

The transcendent world is left on one side, as unreal, or at least doubtful. Man is the sure, and God the problematical. Theism is a hypothesis to be tested on its merits. Thoughts of death lie far ahead ; immortality is an open question, and its solution need not be allowed to interfere with the more pressing problems of life.

For a time perhaps the once-forbidden pleasures will prove enticing. Within the new found freedom the guide to life is found in the maxim, ' Let us enjoy the good things that now are.' In time, the pursuit of pleasure for pleasure's sake is found to be a blind alley, and with satiated appetites men turn back from its barrier wall.

A new and higher pleasure is then sought for in the battle against evil, and the quest for beauty and truth and goodness. The simple intelligible second commandment of love of neighbour is taken as the rule of life ; the first commandment is left in a mist of obscurity, or interpreted as being just a more pious way

## TELL JOHN

of expressing the second. Faced with the concrete evil of a world of slums and sweated labour and war, men draw up concrete plans and programmes and found societies for their reform. With growing scientific knowledge man shall achieve ever greater success in using the good things of the world for his enjoyment. God or chaos, whichever it be gave birth to man, though doubtless, meaning well, were somewhat deficient in their plans for human happiness ; man by man's effort shall reform their work in love for man.

As this phase progresses, some, while still focussing their attention on this present world of concrete fact, will give to their growing idealism a religious colour. Attention is focussed on those moods of exaltation, when man finds in himself an inward peace and harmony with the world in which he lives. The idealism of man, his love of beauty, his zeal for truth and his achievements in the search for truth, are all taken as signs that he is but a step removed from the gods, if gods there be. The language of orthodoxy is perhaps reinterpreted, with

## *,THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

minor adjustments to fit it to its new framework. In Jesus is seen the spirit of human love made perfect ; we call His spirit divine, and thereby flatter by implication our own spirit, which we suppose but a step removed from His. Belief in God is evolved out of the peaks of the experience of man. God as transcendent person is still ignored as curious myth. God is a name for the immanent voice in man which assents to truth and goodness ; God is a name for the ideal of culture which lies ahead. The Kingdom of God is a religious metaphor for the social Utopia, which with a little patience and a little effort man hopes shortly to achieve.

On the broad page of history some of the characteristics of this revolt against traditional authority, and this preoccupation with the ideal in man may be seen in the revival of the appreciation of the Greek ideals of art and learning in the Renaissance. On a smaller scale in the eighteenth century Deists and rationalists curiously foreshadow more recent revolts against religious orthodoxy. To-day we live on the crest of a wave where in every Christian denomination, and

## TELL JOHN

even in the other world religions, there has been a revolt against tradition, a turning to new thought and learning, and a reverence for the achievements of man. In twentieth-century religion, with varying emphasis from varying people, all the characteristics of this phase are there : the view of Christianity as primarily a social Gospel, the stress on the Greek trinity of beauty and truth and goodness, the preoccupation with religious experience, the interest in the human Jesus rather than in the transcendent Christ, the belief in the immanence rather than in the transcendence of God. From the dead seed of a formal orthodoxy there has sprung, first the blade, with the sharp edge of a merciless sincerity, and the fresh green of new life.

This phase of revolt is a necessary stage in the development of religion, and indeed a necessary element for the vitality of religion. Continually men must suspect and criticise formal religious theories, if religion is ever to become more than theoretical ; continually they must seek with their utmost effort for truth and righteousness, in order later to discover that the true goal of their seeking

## THE GROWTH OF THE CORN

comes, not from any effort of theirs but only from the grace of the transcendent God. The blade is not the fruit, and not even the ear that can hold the fruit, but it is essential to the growth of the fruit and it remains a permanent part of the plant.

In this phase too development tends to become arrested. There is a fear that any return to the teaching of orthodoxy will be a move not forward but backward, a return to the still near empty tomb of a formal obscurantist tradition. There is also a fear, latent though not explicit, that further development will mean the loss of the new found freedom. Man the egoist is as yet still his own lord. *I* choose Christ as my hero ; *I* have ideals ; *I* by my effort work for the attainment of my ideals ; even God depends for His existence on the success of *my* arguments, and for His reality on *my* religious experience. The pride of man dies hard !

This second phase has however within itself the causes of its own disruption and supersession. It claims to be enlightened, realist, rationalist ; if its realism and its rationalism are carried to their full con-



## TELL JOHN

clusion, then its own inner insufficiency becomes manifest.

Love of neighbour was taken as the simple rule of life ; but is that rule so simple ? How do we know, not in abstract theory, but in each new concrete situation of actual life, who is our neighbour, and what it means to love him ? Do we seek his immediate pleasure ? But what if the fulfilment of his immediate desires would do him harm ? Do we seek his ultimate good ? How do we judge what is the ultimate good of man ? The problem is harder when we turn as we must from the individual to society. How do we know in the present concrete situation of industrial and political life what is the immediate next step that love would prescribe ? Against our will we begin to recognise that man is ignorant, and the first-breach is made in the citadel of our proud faith in human self-sufficiency.

Even if we know what is right, how then shall we achieve what is right ? Can we rest satisfied with a love which is at heart deceptive, the external parade of an affection which we do not feel ? If the love that is

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

demanded is rather the genuine love which we have for our close friends, can we of our own power achieve such love to order toward our enemies? The more in earnest we become with the humanitarian ethic, and the more we try to take the last short step and to follow the example of Christ, the more do we come to that most realist cry of St. Paul, 'The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not that I do.' Freedom from authority seemed a gospel while still we were striving for it ; once it is won, the freedom seems an empty thing, since it leaves us merely the slaves of our own imperfect nature. Moreover, the difficulty is again yet greater when we turn to society. If we are realist we must recognise that we live in a world where men unite in fellowship with full vigour and enthusiasm for the obviously evil end of mutual destruction in war, yet for the good end of achieving an equitable share alike of the labour and of the proceeds of industry become a prey to a paralysing blindness and inertia. Against our will we recognise that man is impotent. A further breach is made in our proud boast to be lord

## TELL JOHN

of our own lives. Now through ignorance, now through impotence, we miss the mark of life. For missing the mark, the New Testament uses a word seldom if ever heard amid the complacency of humanism, namely sin.

A further more simple fact must be faced in full realism. In the earlier phase we made culture our end, the attainment for ourselves or for others of wealth in this world, material wealth, or wealth of knowledge or art, or it may be wealth of religious experience. No doubt of our own power we made some progress toward this end. Toward the ultimate success of our efforts, it matters not whether in their material or their idealistic or their most lofty religious form, the world in which we actually live returns a decisive No, with the verdict of death to the individual, and death at long last to the race. We pursue the accumulation of riches in this world, material or spiritual ; there comes a day when the world answers back to us, ' Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee, and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be ? ' ; and the greater has been our success in the accumulation of wealth,

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

the greater will be the mockery of the world, as we part with all that we have laboured to acquire. We thought to tame the monster chaos on which we rest and which gave us birth ; we thought to turn her hidden powers of steam and electricity more and more for our enjoyment ; but the last fierce word rests with her with the verdict of death, and the chaos, untamed, laughing last will laugh long.

If in full realism the facts of the life of Jesus are faced, there is no encouragement but further and final destruction for any proud belief in the divinity of man. If Jesus were divine simply in the perfection of His humanity, if He were just a step more excellent than other men, the enlightened and the good would have welcomed His teaching and hastened to follow His example. In fact, they crucified Him. A world where such a man is brought to such a death, this is a picture of the kind of world in which we live, and of the kind of people whom we are. At Calvary men such as we are, only better, men with all their utmost powers of religion and of government and of love, are tried in the

## TELL JOHN

balance of a divine perfection and found wanting. Making man the measure of man, we judge ourselves by ourselves, and naturally feel complacent that we are no worse than ourselves. The cry rings out across the world, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do!' If we hear that cry, we learn first that we ourselves need forgiveness. Under the shadow of the Cross, if nowhere else, we learn the meaning of sin, not the truism that man at his worst is not quite so good as man at his best, but the new fact that man at his best, with his utmost vision and his utmost effort, still falls short of the glory of God. We know that our present life is set in a far country estranged from God; we come to ourselves and cry, 'Father, I have sinned.'

Man was the real, we said, and God the problematical. Sin and death and the Cross force us to realise that man is of all things strange and problematical. Man, the self-interested, self-centred man in the inmost being of each of us, has made the attempt to be lord of his own life, worshipping his own potential divinity; there comes a day of

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

disillusionment, when man realises that he is in fact lord, neither of the beginning of his life, nor of the use he makes of his life, nor least of all of the destiny of his life. Thinking himself but a step removed from the gods, man seeks to eat the tree of knowledge, that he may become enlightened, and be as the gods ; there comes a day when he is allowed to eat and is enlightened ; he learns then the full measure of his estrangement from God, and runs to hide his shame. We had claimed to be free ; such freedom as we do indeed possess now seems a vain thing, when we learn that the real objects of our desire, vision and the power to live in accordance with our vision, are beyond our grasp. We had hoped to save the world by our efforts, with concrete programmes for the reform of the social and religious order ; we learn that the evil in the world lies in a deeper cause of which slums and unemployment and dead creeds and liturgies are but symptoms, namely in the sin in the heart of man. Very unwillingly we suffer our pride and self-sufficiency to be broken. We long for a vision and a power which are not of our

## TELL JOHN

achieving, and for a life which is not mocked at by death. We wait for a renewing of our mind. We learn what it means to repent.

In the acknowledgment that man, and first of all that this man that is myself, is radically estranged from his soul's desire, and cannot of his own power overcome, or indeed fully know that estrangement, there is the first dawn of a religion that is truly religion. The veils of an idealising delusion are torn aside, and man, newly humbled, learns the full paradoxical perplexity of his own nature. Religion ceases to be what it was in its earlier phases, a practice and a system of beliefs and an experience of which the I of man is centre. With a Copernican revolution the I of man is ousted from centrality, in the new longing for a salvation more than human. Therewith at least the first step is taken toward the realisation of the centrality of God.

In this wholly negative longing, in this broken spirit and contrite heart, there is a religion which first has the right to take to itself the name of Christ. Jesus used little of that language at present so common in His

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

Church, He taught little of the ultimate worth of the trinity of values, or of the goal of a social and cultural Utopia on earth, or even of the paramount importance of religious experience. He did teach that those who hunger and thirst for a righteousness which is not yet theirs shall be filled ; that those who are poor and know their poverty of spirit inherit the Kingdom of God ; that the man who stood afar off from God in the temple, and dared not lift his head, left the temple justified ; that sinners and outcasts, who know at least their own insufficiency, are the first to enter the kingdom.

In the realisation of the estrangement of man from God there is the first condition of the rediscovery of the meaning of Christian orthodoxy. So long as we suppose ourselves but a step removed from the gods, and complacently deify our own present nature, and make man as he is the measure of God, we rest our thinking on a background which makes nonsense of orthodoxy. We may succeed in taking some of the old phrases, and fitting them into this modern framework, but we shall so distort them in the process



## TELL JOHN

that they would never be recognised by those who first used them. Only when we have outgrown this first foolish pride, shall we be in a position to understand. We shall begin by being radically in earnest with the doctrine of the Fall ; this does not mean the unearnest theory of a fall in days far past in Adam or ape, but the fully earnest fact that the world here and now with all men in it is estranged from God, and cannot of itself find the way back to God. On this background, and only on this background, other Christian doctrines will become intelligible, for on this background they were framed. Those who framed these doctrines were mature beings, who had tried with utmost effort to serve God, and had learnt the impossibility that the utmost human effort should reach the presence of God. We shall surrender the presumptuous deification of man, and acknowledge that man as he is at his best remains sinful, separated by sin from the Holy God. We shall recognise that to think to flatter Jesus and ourselves by equating the perfection of His humanity with divinity is not to reinterpret orthodoxy, still less to believe in

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

orthodoxy, but to deny orthodoxy ; this supposed new Christology is nothing but the old heresy of denying the two natures, made worse by the fact that in its modern form the divine nature is absorbed into the human, not the human into the divine. We shall begin to understand that we need for our salvation, not the smooth development of humanity into a further degree of humanity, which will then be called divinity, but rather the radical transformation of humanity through the sanctifying power of the transcendent Spirit of God.

In this sense of a common failure and a common urgent need there is the first basis of fellowship between man and man. The natural man is an individualist, self-seeking, proud, and the natural human society is disintegrated by his acquisitive individualism. In the earlier phases of religion this individualism is fostered, and the religious man thinks that he stands on a pedestal, superior to his fellows, judging and condemning his fellows. Only when man has fallen from his petty pedestal does love become possible. The truly Christian have done what is most

## TELL JOHN

simple in theory and most difficult in practice, they have consented to abdicate from the seat of judgement, knowing that judgement is the prerogative of God. The truly Christian know like St. Paul, that 'all have sinned and come short of the glory of God'; and knowing this they recognise further, renouncing at last their loveless Pharisaism, 'I am as all men are, of sinners the chief.'

Writ large across the face of history there is the lesson that the effort of man to be enlightened, and to achieve by his work a world decked with cultural values, leads at long last to disillusionment. The trust of man in his own divine powers is broken; there comes penitence, a sense of shame and of the need of forgiveness, a search for the power which comes from the living God. After the Renaissance there comes Luther, teaching that man can achieve righteousness never by his works, but only through responding in trust to the faithfulness of God. After the Deist movement there comes the Wesleyan and the later Evangelical revival. Will it be different to-day after the new

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

liberation and the new enlightenment ? The false safety of infallible authorities in Bible or Creed has been left behind ; there are many signs that the resulting insecurity is leaving men dissatisfied, and that they are searching with new earnestness for the true authority of the living Word of God. Already on the continent Karl Barth has for some years been proclaiming with new faith the faith of Luther and Calvin. Continental Protestantism is learning again from him that the world is radically estranged from the purpose of its Creator, that no road which man can build or travel leads back to God, that man must look for a power beyond himself, and hope and pray that He who has created will redeem. In this country the revival of evangelical piety in the Group Movement, and the revival of Wesleyanism in Wesleyan Groups, are signs on the horizon of the dawning of a new day. From the green blade there has grown, empty and expectant, the ear.

The penitence of the third phase prepares the way for the fourth. The penitence must be genuine. There is a danger of a spurious,

## TELL JOHN

hypocritical penitence. Pride, aping humility, still at heart self-centred, cries, 'Lord, I thank Thee that I at least am penitent.' Only by a genuine revolt from the false safety of tradition, followed by a genuine disillusionment with self, do men come really to stretch out hands in need to the living God. Continually men must seek with might and main for truth and righteousness, in order then to discover that the goal of their search can only come as the gift of God. 'Il est bon,' wrote Pascal, 'd'être fatigué par l'inutile recherche du vrai bien, afin de tendre les bras au libérateur.' Where there is such penitence, the way is made straight for the action and the self-revelation of God.

No human transition leads from the third phase to the fourth. The goal that lies ahead is not a human standpoint where man can take his place, and proudly contrast himself with others who have not yet attained. Even the penitence, though it prepares the way for God, is not to be regarded as a human condition which in any sense conditions the action of God. The last possible word of human religion is the one non-Pharisaic,

28

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

utterly negative word, ' Lord, to me a sinner have mercy.'

Then in a moment which we know not God reveals His Grace. The fourth phase rests in the hand of God and does not lie within the powers of men ; it has the quality of eternity, and may only with caution be regarded as in one series with the successive phases of human religion. 'The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation : neither shall they say, Lo, there ! Lo, here !' In the past there is always only human theory and human ritual, outward forms through which God may have spoken, and which are pointers to His Word, but which nevertheless are in themselves no more than dead human thoughts and human actions. The Church will ever seek through its Bible and its Sacrament and its preaching to proclaim the Word of God, but it will ever recognise that all that it can hold in time in human hands are dead forms and symbols, which at best are pointers away from itself toward God. Seen from within time the Spirit of God is ever a Spirit of Promise. The action of God lies ever in the future, and

## TELL JOHN

men must ever again repent and wait and hope and watch and pray.

Despite these paradoxes, (and here, with our minds no longer content to theorise about God, but attempting to face the living reality of God, we are not afraid of paradox!), God does act and speak. God the eternal breaks into the temporal. God the Creator makes Himself known to man the creature. God the holy reveals to man the sinner that man is nevertheless the object of His love. God reveals in the concrete instant His purpose of love, that man may know how to act, and God gives His Spirit of power, that man may be able to act. There comes a moment when amid all the perplexity of human existence God is the certain and the sure. In place of the external authority of lifeless creeds and codes, man knows with the certainty of faith the authority of the living personal Word of God. In place of the empty freedom to do what little he can with his own, man knows in spontaneous response to the calling of God, the liberty of a will reborn with power from on high.

Those who have sinned, and those who

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

have learnt at Calvary that their complacency is itself the height of sin, hear and understand. Through the human Jesus there breaks a Word that is not human, a Word of another nature, the Word of the transcendent God in self-revealing love. God in Christ shows to the world the full tragic cost of the Fall. God in Christ accepts the cost, forgives, calls the world back into unconditioned fellowship with Himself. God in Christ not merely reveals that He is a forgiving God, though that is true, but in point of fact forgives. The graciousness of the love of God is spoken in the person of the crucified Jesus. ✓ The promise is offered of a kingdom whose gateway is not the peaks of human culture but the bearing of a Cross. Here we remain strangers and sojourners, as all our fathers were, but henceforth we look for a city that is eternal, whose author and founder is God.

Those who would speak of the self-revelation of God are strangely yet naturally alike in what they say. Out of the depths of a need that is eternal, they have faced a reality that is eternal, answering that need.



## TELL JOHN

The scribe who is trained in the traditional language of the institution brings out of his treasury language old and venerable, but to him now wholly new. Where Paul laboured to plant the seed, and Apollos watered, the increase without which all were dead has come from God.

What then shall we do? The question must be asked, but we must beware what we mean when we ask it. We can ask what *we* shall do. We can ask for rules of behaviour whereby we may earn the favour of God. We can find ourselves back in the earliest phases of our travels, self-centred, seeking a means whereby we may become self-righteous. The question must lead us ever again along the road that ends in utter urgent penitence. The question must baffle us till we ask despairing, what *shall* we do? The question must rest with us till it leads us to hear that other question, the question from God, 'What wouldest thou that I should do unto thee?'

The graciousness of God in Christ must overshadow the whole of life and every moment of life. The new life is not a life which we can live, but a life which is hid with

## *THE GROWTH OF THE CORN*

Christ in God. Then we shall go forth, the slave of Christ, free in His service, to tell of His grace. The work of the institutional church, which seemed so dead, so formal, so dangerous in its formalism, and which often enough as practised is dangerous and deadly, now takes on a new meaning as we know the end to which it may lead. We in our turn go forth to sow broadcast a seed with human words, trusting that for others the miracle may happen, and the human word may die, and the seed may blossom into new life.

We shall go forth, not only in word but in action, zealous to reform the world, till it become a place worthy of the love of God for men His children. The paradoxical is again true ; it is those whose whole life and being are centred on the call and the gift of power from God from another world, and on the destiny of man in another world, who are most truly effective for reform in this world. In Christ crucified, the sacrifice sufficient for all time to break through the complacency of men, men learn, first how amazing it is that God should love them, and then that nevertheless amazingly God does love them.

## TELL JOHN

Thence comes from the graciousness of God a sanction and a power which breaks through the inertia of egoism, and which achieves those miracles of reform, which before men longed for, but lacked the power to achieve.

Paul, under the compulsion of the Gospel, 'If God so loved us, should not we also love one another?' transformed a corrupt Roman world. Luther and Calvin, knowing that in God's hand alone were initiative and freedom and love, were sent back by God into the world to transform a Church grown corrupt. After the Wesleyan and Evangelical revival there came the inspiration and the power to abolish the slave trade and reform factories. So it will be to-day. From a new penitence, and a new discovery of the graciousness of God, there will come in the gift of God the conquest of war and of cycles of unemployment, and a new reform of the Church. From the grace of God there comes, last, the gift of vision and of faith to achieve the vision, the gift of the Spirit of power divine not human, the gift of love, as in heaven, so on earth in industry and politics and church. From God there comes, last, the full corn in the ear.

## II

### *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

*' The seeds rot under their clods ; the garner is desolate, the barns are broken down ; for the corn is withered.'*

*' Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.'*

*' Ours is not to give birth to God but to give testimony of Him.'*

KARL BARTH



## CHAPTER II

### *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

NEARLY a hundred years ago Newman was on board a ship which lay becalmed in the Straits of Bonifacio. He was alone, and, in his loneliness, feeling the urgency of the need which summoned him home. To-day a deputation attends at Lambeth Palace to rouse the heads of the Anglican Church to give fitting celebration to the centenary of the Oxford Movement. In this way we continue the pleasant task of building the tombs of the prophets. Men will always find it easier to believe in movements rather than in God or themselves. The big men of the day bury their hatchets in order to unite in doing honour to the dead prophets, whom, had they met in the flesh, they would have neither honoured nor liked. We are bidden to stand gaping inside the vast ecclesiastical factory, which dates from the Oxford Move-

## TELL JOHN

ment, while the spirits of Newman, Froude, and Keble, who cared for none of these things, wander, lonely as ever, in the darkness outside. The Oriel men believed in the message God had spoken to them, and in themselves as heralds of that message : they believed not at all in committee meetings and committee men, and the ecclesiastical big drum. They must surely smile from the heavens to see the august body now forming into committee to do them honour. Yet the situation is more tragic than comic. The ecclesiastical factories are working very hard to deliver the goods : they are ready to rationalise, or nationalise, or popularise, or anything else, so long as the god industry can be kept a going concern. But the slump in the god industry is, like the slump in other trades, due to world causes. Outwardly there is still a good deal of business-like noise and activity, which deceives many people as to the real nature of the situation : this deception may keep the industry going for a long time to come. The tragedy lies in the fact that those responsible for the god industry are themselves deceived by their own

## *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

noise and activity. They honestly believe that they are delivering the goods that are wanted.

See how the commercial travellers in religion run hither and thither, with their sacred systems, their social schemes, and their one volume commentaries, in their travelling bags ! See how they set about the parish clergy, and make them set about their parishes, collecting statistics of communicants, compelling the outsiders to come in by adding their names to the electoral roll, driving them to this missionary exhibition and that united service, organising them into processions of witness, binding them to support this social venture and that help-the-adolescent league. Really there is no end to the goods they have to deliver. What energy, what forethought, what painstaking care, what strength and talent, what organising ability, are devoted to making God a going concern. Poor old God ! One is reminded of the story of the saintly man, who, addressing a band of enthusiastic members of the Student Christian Movement, said : ‘ So, my young friends, you think that God needs



## TELL JOHN

all you young people to help Him put the world right. Well, well, what I say is, poor old God if He needs all you young people to help Him.'

'Except a man be born again . . . ' This we neither hear nor understand. Or, if we take the words upon our lips, we do so in a 'religious' sense, which robs them of their vital meaning, and leaves them among the other harmless stock-in-trade of religious piety. Neither hearing nor understanding the words, we turn with relief to the god industry, whose goods are within the grasp of both hand and mind. The real hearing of these words awakens a great doubt, that it may be overcome by a still greater expectancy ; it awakens a great despair, that it may be overcome by a still greater trust ; it awakens a great weakness, that it may be overcome by a still greater strength ; it awakens the great 'No' of denial, that it may be overcome by the still greater 'Yes' of affirmation. It is from this struggle, where victory can only come through defeat, where certainty can only come through uncertainty, where life can only come through

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

death, it is from this that we summon all our human powers to deliver us. Let there be no mistake about it. *Our flight to God is an escape from God.* From God, who calls and summons us, we turn away to escape into a religion of piety and spirituality ; from God, who acts and rules, we turn away to escape into a religion of social programmes and organisation ; from God, who makes Himself known, we turn away to escape into a religion of personal experience and knowledge. It is not strange that there is no testimony of God given by us : we are neither called, nor moved, nor known of God. There is neither discipleship, apostleship, nor witness among us ; there is no soil ready for the word of God : there is no message, there is no doctrine, of God.

Let us examine a little further our flight from God.

Let us watch the people as they gather at eleven o'clock of a Sunday morning in a grand Norman church on the sea coast. Standing in the centre of the little town, the town itself built on a hill, the church still holds the place of honour. Here the god

## TELL JOHN

industry is doing a respectable business. As the choir enters on the last stroke of the big clock, the congregation rises ; there are well dressed men and women, children and young people with their parents, girls from a neighbouring school in charge of one of the mistresses, children from the Sunday school watched over by their teachers, the churchwardens standing in the centre aisle, signalling to late comers with gentlemanly nods. ' To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses though we have rebelled against Him . . . ' The words ring down the church. Yet the rebels do not seem at all surprised or moved by these opening words ; there is no catching of the breath or quickening of the pulse such as one might have expected when this message of good news was spoken to them. But that is just the point. There is *no message* here ; only the recital of old dead words written by dead men of long ago. There is no good news here, nothing to cause men to leap to their feet and lift their heads in expectancy and fear. Nothing has been spoken and nothing has been heard. The lips have moved, the ear-drums have

## *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

vibrated at the sound, that is all ; no word has been spoken, no word has been heard ; nothing of meaning has happened. And so the service proceeds : the singing of the choir is faultless, the lessons are read intelligently, the prayers are spoken in a voice that all can hear ; everything is done in the very best manner, the machinery runs smoothly ; the goods are being delivered. And then comes the sermon : what an opportunity for salesmanship ! The young man in the pulpit knows his trade. It is the time of Confirmation classes, and we have already heard during the giving out of the notices that it is the duty of all parents, god-parents, employers, and heads of families, to see that the unconfirmed are brought to Confirmation. This is the young man's theme. He enlarges with eloquence—for he speaks without notes—on the privilege, the responsibility, the necessity, of being one of the inner circle in the Church of Christ, one of the chosen : he tells them that while unconfirmed they remain outsiders, outside that elect fellowship, the Body of Christ. See to what lengths the god makers will go ! They will permit

## TELL JOHN

themselves any extravagance so long as they can deliver the goods, and so long as they can take god in their hands and shape him to the need of the moment. No arrogance is beyond them, and no claim is too big for them. There is no depth of self-deception which they will not plumb, if thereby they can persuade the folk to use the god they are making. And this is Christian preaching : this is the speaking of the impossible word of good news to the poor, the needy, and the hungry ! This deft juggling and conjuring, this card manipulation, this is what Christian preaching has become in many of the churches of the land ! How eloquent we are in these latter days with our sermon courses, our visiting preachers, our broadcast addresses, our week-night studies of modern problems, and all the other latest methods of advertising the goods in our god factories ! And how strange, when all has been said, and our sermon notes have been filed until next time, that nothing has happened ; that everything is exactly the same as before we began ! But is it strange ? Did we really expect anything to happen ? Should we not

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

be a little disappointed if we could not have another course of sermons next Lent ?

How different to all this Christian preaching might be, if it would leave the god industry alone, and enter into that sense of urgency and need in which alone it can be justified. For Christian preaching is giving testimony of God, or it is nothing : indeed it is worse than nothing, it is pot-boiling, play-acting, and monkey-tricks. Christian preaching is the very antithesis of the attempt to give birth to God. It is directed to the end that *God* may speak, and for that reason it looks beyond itself and bids others look beyond itself. It never seeks to justify itself. It hates and shrinks from all that points to itself, to the man who is preaching, to the church in which he preaches, or to the situation to which the preacher addresses himself. Christian preaching must ever point beyond itself, in its need and in its weakness, and in its desire to say that which it cannot utter : it comes to life in the death of all eloquence, of all power of words and reasoning. ‘ The grass withereth, the flower fadeth : but the word of our God shall stand for ever.’ It is

## TELL JOHN

in the realisation of just this 'fading' quality that there lies the promise of Christian preaching—the word which stands for ever.

There is, and can be, no Christian preaching, nor Christian message, so long as we are engaged in the business of promoting religious piety and religious spirituality. The saints of the New Testament are not the pious or the spiritual : they are rather the not many wise, the not many mighty, the not many noble, who are *called by God*. The calling of God has nothing whatever to do with our piety or our spirituality. The practices of devotional religion are for the most part only the refined products of the god industry. It was certainly not for this that Jesus gathered disciples on the shore of the Lake of Galilee. From that imperious 'Follow me,' we turn away to the less exacting demands which we can make upon ourselves in the name of religion and our own spiritual welfare.

In a similar way we turn away from God who acts and rules to escape into a religion of social programmes and organisation. We spoke earlier of man's love of movements :

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

no one understands this taste better than the god makers. The wheels of many mighty machines are kept revolving in order to supply the wants of those who are only happy when they are moving something. Any parish clergyman will testify to the efficiency of these machines by pointing to the size of his daily letter bag, and, if he is a wise man, to the fulness of his waste-paper basket.

We all feel that something has got to be *done*. Our actions must show that we are busy about God's business. But since a single individual, who dares to sit down alone, and ask himself in the silence and loneliness of his own individual life, 'What am *I* to *do*?', finds it very difficult, yes impossible, to answer his question, he must be relieved from a situation so perplexing and distressing, and told what, in company with others, it will be the right thing for him to do. The god industry sees to it that the poor harassed individual is rescued from his loneliness at the psychological moment, and linked up securely with one or more of the big movements. He finds great relief in thus escaping from the perplexity and doubt



## TELL JOHN

kindled in his breast by the question of what he, in the distinctiveness of his own individual life, is going to do. He abandons himself to the ' practical ' work prepared for him by the god makers, and in thus saving his life he loses it. What a fine trade the god makers do here ! What money, what printing ink and paper, what committees and minute books, what resolutions and what advertising, go into this good work of reform !

However, movements for reform are somewhat less the fashion than they were. Pageants, campaigns, crusades, exhibitions, mass meetings, united services, something with colour and music in it, these are the goods *à la mode* to-day. Scarcely a month passes in any diocese without the production of a new ecclesiastical theatre piece : some of the clergy are finding their true vocation in the rôle of producers of these pieces. The god makers rejoice in all these forms of entertainment because so many people can be persuaded to act a part or speak a word.

And what is all the fuss about ? What is the end to which all this activity is directed ? If we really have something important to say

## *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

and do, does it require so much preliminary setting of the stage? Is it not rather the truth that so much preparation is a screen for hiding the emptiness at the heart of the whole business? When the curtain goes up there is no drama of life and death; nothing to move us, as we would be moved by a great play: there is only a puppet show: we can see the wires and we know how it is all done: possibly we are entertained for a short while, but there is no fundamental movement within us. We are certainly not thus moved by God. Does not doubt enter us at this point in our reflections? If we take our Bibles and read the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, or the Gospels, or the opening chapters to the first Epistle to the Corinthians, or the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, or the twenty-first of Revelation, does no doubt enter our souls whether we are really doing what we so loudly proclaim we are doing? Shall we not go on to say that if the Christian message and Christian action really need this bolstering up on our part, then they have very much changed their character since the days when Paul walked the streets of Corinth? Will it

## TELL JOHN

not occur to us that this immense business in organisation and preparation is a means of *escape* from the will of God who sends us out *as we are* to tell the good news to the poor and to heal the sick ?

The writer was once present at a meeting of clergy summoned to discuss the possibility of holding a mission in the town in which their parishes were situated. One who claimed considerable experience in the work of missions, emphasised the necessity of long and careful preparation for the mission : he declared that nothing less than a year was any good and that two years was not too much. There was a lengthy discussion on the methods of carrying out a mission, but not one present raised a question about the message that the mission was to carry. *It was taken for granted.* No one seemed to be aware that there was a blank at the very centre of the whole scheme : every effort was to be made to bring home the appeal to the people of the neighbourhood, but what the appeal was no one seemed to think it necessary to question. It is just here, at this central point, that the efforts of the god makers show

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

their ineffectiveness : they have no centre of gravity. In their enthusiasm to meet the demand for *practical* Christianity, the god makers entirely overlook the question of *what* it is that is to be made practical. In truth the religion of active service is often one of the subtlest ways in which the god makers *escape* from giving an answer to the question, ' What shall we do ? ' They dare not face the real hearing of this question ; they dare not let it take them to that doubt and despair, where they must needs begin to understand the weakness and unprofitableness of anything that they can do ; they are at once too proud and too fearful to be led by the constant hearing of that question into the darkness of that uncertainty, where man turns from himself and the works of his hands to listen and watch what *God* is doing. Our present condition is like that of those of whom it was said, ' I found all men drunken and none found I athirst.' We have drunk long and deeply of the sweet wine of the idolatry which worships the works that men do for God: we lust after improving the world for God.

' Except a man be born again . . . ' The

## TELL JOHN

words press upon us once more : but we are still not ready to hear them. No longer perhaps satisfied by the goods of the god makers, we decide to set up in business on our own. From being known of God, we escape into the religion of a personal experience and understanding which knows God. We may not be able to bring God to birth in the church and in the market-place, but we can still do so in the private dwelling-places of our own consciousness. At this stage we are not concerned to bring God into the world, or to bring the world to God ; rather, we are interested spectators of what God has done, and is doing, in the world. We have become wise and experienced in our detached and dispassionate survey of the flux of events, past, present, and future. We have built for ourselves a bridge where we may stand leaning over the parapet to watch the river of life flow by. We know its course from the hills where it rises to the sea where it empties its waters. From many points of view we know that river ; we know it as scientists, having traced its course, or analysed its constituent parts ; we know it as artists,

## *THE CORN IS WITHERED*

having seen it on dull days and fair days, in spate in spring, and dried up in summer ; we have known its music and its song. But always as spectators. Of the pulse of its flow, we know nothing ; our life's movement is not related to its life movement. We have no desire to be moved by that same urge which moves the river to the sea, for to be moved thus would be to break the spell that keeps us spectators on the bridge, knowing all but known of none.

The knowledge on which we build our much boasted experience is knowledge by analysis or knowledge by description. Always the 'I' of the subject ego stands outside and apart from the object of its knowledge. Our knowledge is of the mind and will, never of the blood. We are not brought by it into any living, moving relationship with that which we know ; our knowledge never becomes a being known.

Thus it has been with our modern lives of Jesus. All the skill of the biographer has been brought to bear on the subject. We have combined historical criticism, psychological analysis, and dramatic insight, to

## TELL JOHN

present a life which shall satisfy us. The results have been vivid studies of Jesus which have become popular reading ; the best of them are interesting, and sometimes exciting, stories, which combine the qualities of the modern biographical memoir and a clever detective novel.

Our knowledge has shattered the stained-glass figure and we congratulate ourselves on knowing at last a man of flesh and blood, moved by dreams and ideals which sometimes stir our own more sluggish natures ; the Jesus of History has become a popular figure, whom the man in the street can appreciate and understand.

But now having read and enjoyed the latest Life of Jesus, and having placed the book on the rapidly filling shelf which we keep for this literature, let us turn for a moment to our Bibles and read the Gospels. What strikes us is the completely different way in which the story is told to us and the facts are set out. There is no attempt in the Gospels to write a biography ; there is no finished portrait. The writers do not seem to be aware how much they are leaving to

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

the imagination of their twentieth-century readers ! They give no dates ; they confuse different accounts of the same event ; they choose curious sayings and anecdotes which seem to us of only minor importance, while leaving out many important points and questions, on which we should like further information. For writers of biography their knowledge seems to us scanty and their power of selecting their material weak. We may, however, spare ourselves the trouble of making up excuses for them ; they knew quite well what they were doing. It is *we* who have mistaken their purpose.

Our knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, of the times in which He lived, of the thought of that age, is probably fuller and more accurate to-day than it has ever been in the history of Christianity. But to know Him thus is not to know Him as the writers of the Gospels knew Him. A curious fate has awaited what Schweitzer has called *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* ; the deeper and more precise our knowledge of the historical setting of the life of Jesus, the more He becomes a stranger to us in the modern



## TELL JOHN

world, the more He becomes a man of His own times. Like Jacob of old, we have wrestled with a Man, joined body to body, arm to arm, but to our cry, 'Tell me, I pray thee, thy name?' there has been no answer.

It is possible that we must first find the blankness of this knowledge if we are to find in the end that other kind of knowledge, where life speaks to life. For it is this which the Gospels give us, and this alone. We may not be prepared yet to hear this, indeed the evidence is strong that we are not, and we may continue in the meantime our search for biography, but in the end we must hear it ; there is no other way. The time must come when we shall cease to be spectators on the bridge.

It is hard for us to begin again when we have known and understood so much : it goes against the grain to confess that our knowledge is no knowledge. 'How can a man be born again ; can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born ?' There is no other way : the pangs of a new birth are upon us. There is opened up before us a great possibility, the possibility of

## THE CORN IS WITHERED

bearing witness to that re-creative word of God, 'Behold, I make all things new,' the possibility of putting aside all our experience, our wisdom, and our knowledge, and coming to *know* God, because we are known of Him. It is to this possibility that the writers of the Gospels bear witness, it is of this possibility that they still speak to us. What they set before us is a new way of knowledge : they speak from within this new world of knowledge : that is why their words are at once so strange to our ears and yet so compelling in their power. The divine knowledge of man is set over against our human knowledge of God, and between the two there is now, as always, not peace but a sword.

Can we then end with some words of practical advice? Can we round off the argument with at least a tentative solution? Obviously we cannot. It is enough if we feel the tension between what is passing away and what is being made new. To understand that God calls us even in the midst of our god-making efforts to become religious, that He reigns even in the midst of the noise and activity of our efforts to make

## TELL JOHN

Him effective in the world, that He knows us and reveals Himself, even in the midst of our attempts to build up our personal experience and knowledge of Him—to understand even this is something. To allow ourselves to feel that tension, to suffer for it in agony of doubt, fear, and despair, that is something. ‘A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow because her hour is come . . .’ In much that is uncertain, of this at least we may be sure.

### III

## *FAITH*

*' Behold, the sower went forth to sow ; . . . some seed fell by the way side ; . . . others fell on rocky ground ; . . . others fell among the thorns ; . . . others fell into the good ground and yielded fruit.'*

*' It is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'*

*' When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find Faith ? '*



## CHAPTER III

### *FAITH*

‘ If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye would say to this mountain, be ye rooted up and cast into the sea, and it would obey you ! ’ We do not believe anything so contrary to common sense. We do believe without question in our common sense. We also believe in convention, and the conventions of the day require that we shall not openly disagree with a saying of Jesus. We therefore escape from the dilemma in which this saying places us by a kindly reference to Oriental hyperbole. Unfortunately such an escape is inadmissible, for Jesus says the same thing clearly and emphatically without hyperbole. ‘ All things are possible to him that believeth. ’ ‘ The things that are impossible with men are possible with God. ’

With God all things are possible. Therein lies the first characteristic of faith. Faith

## TELL JOHN

achieves wonders, but they are God's wonders. Faith is no magic button which men may somehow learn to press, in order to satisfy their own desires. To believe involves the recognition that we live in God's world, that God is not a reservoir of power for our use in our world. In faith we live under orders from God. To believe is to abandon our proud claim to autonomy, and to accept the fact of heteronomy. Faith is the response of man to the calling of God. Faith is the conviction that He who reveals His purpose has also infinite power to achieve His purpose.

God calls, and man acknowledges the calling of his Lord. The invisible God has spoken ; in obedience to Him some action not yet seen must be performed. Faith believes before it sees. It is a venture, a leap in the dark of trust. Often indeed the way may not be wholly dark. Intellectual arguments may lead us to a very high degree of probability that God exists, that He has the power to reveal His desires to men, and that the actions which He requires are within the bounds of human possibility. Arguments, however, never give us that unquestioning

## FAITH

certainty which is characteristic of faith. At times it would seem that God leaves us with the possibility of intellectual doubt, just because He requires of us something very much more than a merely intellectual assent. He requires the allegiance of the will as well as the assent of the mind ; He requires the response of the whole personality in trust. When the intellect has said its last word, the first word of trust is still to be spoken. And faith must be prepared if necessary to believe in the light where all is dark. He who believes must be prepared to cry defiant, ' Let God be true though every human doubt be found a liar ! ', to cry, ' Though He slay me, yet will I believe in Him.' The Christian will find courage, as he remembers that the way has been trodden by his Master. Jesus is brought to the point where He sees His message of love universally rejected. His own assurance of the presence of God is broken. Out of the desolation of His own soul, the cry rings out, ' My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me ! ' Yet still His trust in God is unbroken. God shall triumph ; God shall receive His servant into eternal



## TELL JOHN

life ; in this world the purpose of God shall triumph, and cannot be defeated. Jesus dies, His cry reaching out from the darkness, serene and trustful, 'Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.'

Such trust in God has died from the world. We must seek to understand some faint reflection of its meaning amid the love of man for man. The lover has no proof that his beloved is trustworthy. Those who would seek for proof, will never find a proof which will banish the doubt and suspicion from their hearts, and enable them to discover love. Nevertheless the true lover scorns to suspect and to sit in judgement. He has an unquestioning faith that the beloved is in every respect worthy. With this same trust God calls for love from man.

Faith believes before it sees, yet faith also has an unquestioning confidence that the wonder will happen and the power of God be revealed. This confidence in God has also died from the world, and we must seek yet further, if we would find in human experience some faint reflection of its meaning. In our living we are mere amateur players ;

## *FAITH*

in our play we are sometimes more serious than we know. To indifferent players of such games as golf or billiards there sometimes comes a day when strangely, inexplicably, they are on their game. The difference seems scarcely to be their own achievement. On other days the most ardent efforts serve only to show how vain are all human efforts. On this day the same thousand wrong courses for their ball lie open, for the one right course. The least tremble of hand or wrist would turn their ball astray. Yet on this day they have an unquestioning confidence that their ball will go direct to its goal, and their confidence is justified by resulting success. Such is the quality of the whole life, where the life is lived in simple, certain, Christ-like confidence in God.

God is Lord of life to the believer ; the believer lives under orders ; he lives in obedience to orders ; he has unquestioning confidence that He who commands man, has also power through the faith of man to achieve His commands. The Roman centurion understood. He also was a man under authority. He knew what it was to receive

## TELL JOHN

orders from above. He knew what it was to pass on orders to subordinates. With all the might of the discipline of Rome behind him, he could have no doubt that his orders would be obeyed. He could say to this man go, and he goeth, and to another come, and he cometh.

In Christ the centurion recognised a kindred spirit. Here also was one who lived under authority. As a boy Jesus asks, 'Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business,' as though surprised that there could be any doubt that this was the way of life for man. Faced with the final crisis, where most the prospect of suffering might turn Him aside from the purpose of God, He prays, 'Nevertheless not my will but Thine be done.' Here also was one who just because He lived under authority could Himself speak and act with authority. He speaks with authority, certain of the mind of God, certain of obedience, not as the scribes. He goes to men preoccupied with their business and trade ; He knows that His Father would have Him select and train disciples ; He breaks into their lawful

66

## *FAITH*

occasions with the command, 'Follow me !' The words on human lips ought to sound arrogant to the point of absurdity ; in fact they sound simple and natural and direct, because they rest on faith in God ; they are not merely human, but are the echo of a divine command, and as such they are obeyed. Jesus goes to men, crippled and blind, fettered by faithless fears ; He knows that the Father of love desires the health of mind and body of His children ; He bids the lame walk and the blind see. Believing in God, He goes without hesitancy for the goal which He knows to be the purpose of God, and the results show that His faith was not mistaken or misplaced. 'With authority He commandeth even the unclean spirits and they obey Him !' The centurion, knowing what it means in his own sphere to speak with authority, recognises the faith of Jesus, and believes that the word has but to come from Jesus' lips, and his servant will be healed. Jesus acknowledges that the centurion has indeed understood, as have few others, the true quality of trust in God ; and 'Jesus marvelled, and said to them that

## TELL JOHN

followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no not in Israel.'

Jesus expected His followers to live the same life of faith that He did, alike in the unquestioning allegiance to God, and in the works of power. He opened up a path which others might tread. He was constantly surprised at men's lack of faith. He bids His disciples work the same works of healing that He works Himself, and even promises, 'Greater works than these shall ye do.' The most simple lesson of the Incarnation we have least of all understood, that Jesus as man lives a life which other men should follow. We hide from ourselves this lesson of His humanity, because if His be indeed a human life, it puts to shame the wholly different life we lead as men. Instead of the orthodox doctrine that the transcendent Word is spoken through a human life, we substitute the wholly different doctrine that His divinity consists in some mysterious super-humanity ; thereby we seek to avoid the logic of the orthodox doctrine in its simplest element, that since His is the true human life, our human life is sinful. If we

## *FAITH*

know what we do, we do right to take ' the religion of Jesus ' as the example and the standard for the Christian ; if we are in earnest with this standard, we shall then find that the resulting religion of the Christian is the religion of St. Paul, with the utmost sense of failure, of guilt, and of the necessity of Grace.

Most of all is it clear that the faith of Jesus is something wholly different to the quality of our life. We have lost faith. Yes, and that very phrase, if our minds are awake, will show us how deeply we have lost faith. It is very commonly said that our day has lost, or is losing faith, and the phrase on the lips of those reputed orthodox means that others than themselves do not hold the correct theological opinions. We have substituted even as the goal of faith, men holding correct opinions, for men being held in confidence by God. As Jesus recognised faith in a pagan soldier, so we must turn away from the religious and search in the experience of the player and the lover, even to suggest to ourselves what faith in God might mean.

The spirit, the temper and attitude of

## TELL JOHN

mind of man to-day is in every respect alien to faith. Where faith acknowledges the sovereignty of God, to-day men believe that divinity, if there be such a thing as divinity, resides in the spirit of man. Faith exists in heteronomy ; to-day men preserve at all costs autonomy. Man is the measure of all things, even of God. Man with his present limited powers of reason and conscience sits in the seat of judgement, and all things, God included, must justify themselves at the judgement seat of man. The great betrayal of the modern world is made when Descartes starts with the certainty of his own existence, and doubts all things, God included, unless and until they can be justified on the basis of that first certainty of man.

Where faith is content to trust, the mind of man to-day demands in all things to experiment and test. Only that which has been tested and proved is worthy of belief. To believe before we see has become an intellectual crime, a blasphemy against the one divinity which we acknowledge, the divinity of the reasoning powers of man. How hard the words sound, if we venture to acknow-

## *FAITH*

ledge them as meant literally and in earnest, 'Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed.'

As a result of our proud autonomy, we have gained for ourselves a measure of pride and self-esteem, at the infinite cost of losing all certainty of mind. We live amid doubt and hesitancy and fear, and these, as we are beginning to discover, are the damnation of the soul. Men fly for succour to the false authority of infallible book and infallible creed and infallible Pope. Men find there a measure of comfort in the stifling of their own doubts, but they have fled to fallible human words, and they do not find the certainty of faith.

For this alien attitude of mind the New Testament has a name, and that name is temptation. Knowing no longer the meaning of faith, we do not know the true meaning of this word which is its opposite. The word temptation, like all other words in the theological vocabulary, has lost its true meaning, and bears a false debased meaning in current use. It comes to mean that man is tested, by the presentation before his mind of possible



## TELL JOHN

wrong courses of action. It comes then to be equivalent to seduction. We read this meaning of seduction into the central passages of the New Testament, and thus make nonsense of those passages. To Christ, and to the first disciples who understand His mind, temptation is the attitude of mind which preserves a proud autonomy before God, which refuses to trust God, which seeks to test God, which insists that God shall prove Himself by His works before the judgement seat of the mind of man.

The word temptation seems clearly to bear this sense of putting God to the proof, and as such to be opposed to faith, in the third chapter of Hebrews. This meaning of the word makes sense of central incidents in the life of Christ, and of central sayings in His teaching, while the meaning of seduction destroys their significance. It is in this sense of man claiming to be authoritative over God that temptation meets with His fierce denunciation as the denial of trust in God.

‘ Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the Cross, that we may see and believe.’ Here amidst His adversaries is the mind that

## *FAITH*

doubts the message of God, and claims that its doubts shall be removed, not by a change of heart but by an open sign from heaven. And earlier, 'the Scribes and Pharisees came, tempting Him, seeking a sign.' They would not trust Him, for that was to admit and submit to His authority. They wanted to experiment with Him, to make Him prove to their satisfaction that He had indeed divine authority and divine power. Jesus, however, knew that by their method they would never come to acknowledge God, for they were seeking to find God, and yet themselves remain lord in the transaction. Hence comes the fierce lament, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign, and there shall no sign be given.'

Jesus as man knew in Himself the pride of man, which seeks to retain autonomy before God, and which, so long as it does so, can never come to trust and believe the living authoritative Word of God. Once for all He had Himself faced and rejected this pride ; henceforth, hurting to heal, He is fierce in denouncing the pride which separates other men from God. Possibly in

## TELL JOHN

earlier days and again at His Baptism, possibly for the first time at the Baptism, Jesus had heard from God the call to the rôle of Messiah, and knew therewith of the promise from God of Messianic powers. He leaves the Baptism to begin His ministry, to proclaim the Word of God, and to work in obedience to God the healing and saving works of love. But first He departs for a season of quiet into the wilderness, to be tempted by the evil one. There the doubt assails Him. How could He be sure? How could He tell that the Messianic call was indeed the authoritative Word of God, and not the passing delusion of His own subjective fancy? And what of the future? How could He know that when He in obedience spake with authority, a devil-ridden world would indeed obey, and the powers of Heaven would not fail Him, and leave Him exposed as an impostor? And the Tempter came to Him saying, 'If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' If God be truly God, He will not let His servant starve for want of divine aid; let Him try out the trustworthiness of God here

## *FAITH*

alone in the desert, where none will see if He fails. Here is the lurking 'if' of the Tempter, which betokens doubt of God, which refuses to listen to the Word from God, which seeks to be lord and give the orders to God, which demands from God a sign. But Jesus saw that to desire to put God on trial meant that at heart He was doubting God. The experiment was designed to establish the validity of faith, but the faith was not there which was to be justified by the experiment. Where God has called, we may indeed in faith and obedience achieve wonders in His name ; it does not follow that where we have set a condition for God to fulfil, God will then stand before our judgement seat, and demonstrate His power for our satisfaction.

As Jesus refused to test God for His own satisfaction, so He also refused the suggestion that He should work spectacular signs, wherewith to demonstrate the power of God to others. To do so would be to establish them in their lack of faith, not to win them for faith. If they trusted God, they might indeed behold the wonders of the power of God ; desiring first to see the wonders, they

## TELL JOHN

would never see, for they were already in their hearts refusing to believe. By following the Tempter's methods and appealing to their credulity, He might indeed win their passing approval, and inherit the kingdoms of the world, but this was not His mission. The living God had called, the God who demands absolute belief and cannot take rank as one human hypothesis amongst others, the God who claims complete self-committal in trust from men His children. Once for all Jesus rejects the Tempter's methods with the bold refusal, 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.'

If we understand this we may understand why in the heart of the Lord's Prayer there stand the words, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' We do not understand this prayer, for the simple reason that to-day we live in a continual state of temptation, and know nothing of that other life of faith, from which we might be led away. We make nonsense of the prayer, by interpreting temptation in its debased sense of seduction. That there should be wrong courses of action to be

## *FAITH*

refused is not an evil, but the divine method of education. That the evil one should not continue to sow in our hearts the tares of doubt, and of a presumptuous pride which refuses to trust God and which always will doubt, here indeed is an evil from which we may well pray for deliverance.

We shall not of course deny the value of doubt and of the method of experiment within their proper sphere. These form the proper attitude of mind with which to approach the study of the material world. It is through the dissolving acid of doubt that astrology has been banished to make way for astronomy, and alchemy banished to make way for chemistry. The electricity which may summon a doctor to a bed-side, if it may also explode a mine, the aeroplane which may unite the nations in friendly commerce if it may also destroy them in war, these bear witness to the achievements and the value of the empirical method in science. Yet even in science the value of doubt and experiment may be pressed too far, when we come to study the part which the spirit of man may play within the material world. The science

## TELL JOHN

of medicine is learning a lesson once clearly taught and forgotten, a lesson still needed amid all the resources of modern pharmacy and surgery and psycho-therapy, the lesson spoken to the sick, 'Thy faith hath made thee whole.' For long enough the Church has sat at the feet of the scientists, learning the limits of human actions on the basis of a study of actions no more than human. It is for the Church to trust in God, and to achieve the wonders to which He calls, and then to let science study and explain as she may the laws of empirical connection through which the power of the Creator was revealed.

In the whole field of intellectual enquiry scepticism is a duty. Doubt is the proper attitude of mind toward every human theory and every human speculation. Doubt is particularly a proper attitude toward theological speculation, wherever theology remains a human theory, and forsakes its proper function of being a pointer away from man to the living Spirit of the transcendent God. Every thought which the mind of man can hold about God is necessarily inadequate

## *FAITH*

to the glory of God, and therefore necessarily open to criticism and correction. Inevitably there will be some who reading this essay will misunderstand its meaning, and will substitute for faith, credulity, the bastard cousin of faith. Some of these will rejoice in the argument of this essay, and will use it in their attempt to silence that intellectual scepticism which is really necessary, and to support outworn truths in outworn creeds. Others, fearing this misuse of the essay, will fear the whole argument of the essay, and dismiss its whole theme as savouring of obscurantism. Each of these will fall into the same error of supposing that faith means an intellectual assent to human theories about God, whereas the whole theme of the essay is that faith is precisely not this, but rather a personal response to the self-revealing personality of God.

Within the sphere of human personal relationships the dominant attitude of doubt and experiment begins to fail, and to reveal its inadequacy, as a sufficient attitude in life. With this attitude love is denied at the outset, and confidence by one person in the trust-



## TELL JOHN

worthiness of another will never be attained. This was the fatal error of Othello. He was anxious to prove to himself the trustworthiness of Desdemona, but no test which he could devise could silence his doubts and give him the confidence for which he craved. The fault lay not in her but in himself, for his desire to put his beloved on trial was a sign that there was no trust, and therefore no real love in his own heart.

As an attitude toward God the method of doubt and experiment is fatal to the knowledge of God. The transcendent, living, self-revealing God must be trusted to be known. Refusing to give ourselves in trust, we turn our back on God. In His place contemporary religion sets up a hypothetical god or a dead god. To some god is just a hypothesis to be tested on its merits ; theism is just one of a variety of possible views. This is the denial of faith, and the denial of God. The true God claims complete and unconditional allegiance ; to the hypothesis we give a partial and conditional assent. The true God is He who Himself calls and chooses, and demands that men acknowledge

## *FAITH*

an authority not their own ; the hypothesis is a theory which is chosen by our minds, and which must stand on trial before the authority of our minds.

To others God is real but dead. God is a name for a static absolute, or for a static system of natural laws ; we do not suppose that such a god can speak and call us to allegiance. God is a name for our ideals ; but we assume that all the initiative must be on our side, and we do not expect this god to come to our aid as we strive toward him. God is a name repeated in worship, and we suppose it good that as many people as possible should repeat the name, but we do not really confidently expect that any effective difference will result from the repetition. We do not really believe that things impossible with men are possible with such gods as these. Like the dead images of old, the dead god of contemporary religion 'cannot do good neither is it in him to do evil.' A perpetual fury of ecclesiastical organisation is needed to keep his name in honour, for like the dead images also, 'he must needs be born, because he cannot go.'

## TELL JOHN

So long as man, proud in his autonomy, in fact deifies himself, he will know no gods but these, and will not hear the Word of the Living God. God meanwhile is speaking, but He speaks as ever in parables, veiling His glory, for no man can behold the glory of God face to face and live. Now as always it is possible for the believing to hear and understand, and it is also possible for men to stumble at the parable, and see only its outward form, and fail to hear the Word of God. There came a moment in the life of Jesus, when most of all He might be expected to demonstrate the glory of God in visible form, in a way to overwhelm the disbelievers into belief. The opposition of a world, estranged from its Creator, had reached a point where the leaders of religion could behold the works of love of Christ, and could call these works diabolical. And Jesus said, 'A sower went forth to sow, and as he sowed, some fell on stony ground.' Later he explained to his disciples, that to them that believe it is given to hear the Word, and to know the mysteries of the Kingdom, but to others, all things are spoken in parables, that hearing they

82

## *FAITH*

may not hear. The words seem hard, yet how else could He meet their challenge? The leaders of religion claimed that with their religious conventions and rules they had a test of divine action. They sat on the seat of judgement, and God's Messiah must conform to their rules. To them nothing can be said. They may not behold God face to face ; and refusing to trust they cannot recognise Him, when His message is spoken through a parable, and His Word is incarnate in a human life. It is best that they shall go away perplexed, with their pride therefore a little shaken, having heard no more than an empty pastoral tale.

To-day the question is asked, can the rocky ground be broken and the thorn-ridden soil be turned? Will the pride with which man refuses to hear God be broken down? Will our despair with the ineffectiveness of the lifeless gods lead us to turn again and seek in new humility for the true God? Will God use His last stern cure for the pride of man, withholding His blessing, that man may learn again to seek it at His hand?

## TELL JOHN

Should we even pray with Robert Louis Stevenson :

‘ Or Lord, if still obdurate I,  
Choose Thou, before that spirit die,  
A piercing pain, a stabbing sin,  
And to my dead heart run them in.’

When God speaks shall He find men ‘deaf in complacent slumber? When the Son of Man cometh shall He find faith?

If the ground is ready prepared, then it is certain that the seed will bear fruit. Though it be true that if we ask first to see we shall never believe, it is also true that if we believe we shall see. Never may the signs of the power of God be made a condition of faith, yet to those who hope, expect, believe, God does reveal Himself in signs. Not all at once perhaps shall we behold. We must be prepared, if God should ask it, to walk through a valley of shadows. We must be prepared to turn our back on the old conventional landmarks, and to go forth into unknown unexplored territory, led by the hand of God, not knowing whither we go. ‘ I do not ask to see, the distant scene ; one step enough . . . ’ Yet gradually as we go the view will open before

## *FAITH*

our eyes. Where there is assent in trust to the self-revelation of God, there in the created world, in prophet and apostle, in Christ, in Church and Sacrament, in the long dead phrases of liturgy, and in a host of divine coincidences in daily life, God is seen active in self-revelation. Sometimes amid objects long familiar in the routine of normal life, we shall now behold for the first time the reflection of a divine providence. Sometimes God will call to new works of power, and as we respond to His calling there will come powers undreamed of for the performance of His will. Christ refused to minister to the suspicions of the Pharisees by works of miraculous power. Not by this method would their pride be broken and their faith be won. Yet for the messengers of John He used these very works of power as signs that God was indeed active in His world. He bid them 'go and tell John the things which ye do see and hear ; the blind receive their sight, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them ' ; for John, already penitent, expectant and believing, would hear and understand.



## IV

### *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

*‘ O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known.’*

*‘ The vision is yet for the appointed time ; . . . though it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come.’*

*‘ At midnight there is a cry, Behold, the Bridegroom ! ’*

*‘ Art thou He that cometh, or look we for another ? ’*





## CHAPTER IV

### *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

JOHN's active ministry was at an end. He was a prisoner with little hope of release. There was nothing left for him to do but wait. At the beginning of his ministry he had sounded the note of expectation ; at the end of it his faith still had the same expectant quality. Because of this he was able to understand the answer which was sent back to his question, ' Art thou He that cometh, or look we for another ? ' What to many must have seemed no answer at all was to John the unmistakable word of the promise of God. Like the prophet, John had taken his stand upon his watch tower, in order that he might look out beyond the immediate present to hear the promise of God. In the certainty that it could not fail he was prepared to wait for it even though the present gave no signs of its fulfilment.

## TELL JOHN

Christian faith is marked by this quality of expectant watchfulness in a waiting time. For a fuller understanding of its nature we must examine what we mean by the promise of God, the way in which man responds to that promise, and the manner of its fulfilment.

We cannot observe the processes of growth in the natural world without becoming aware that there are what we may call waiting times, when the growth is hidden and before its effects have become apparent. The seeds are planted in the earth and there is a period of waiting until the first green blades pierce the earth's crust. The farmer knows that he must 'sleep and rise night and day', while the seeds spring up and grow 'he knoweth not how.' Again, for long months the corn stands green in the fields and the farmer must wait until the sun and rain have turned it into ripe yellow. What is true in the world of nature is true also in the life of the individual. We cannot determine precisely the day when the child becomes a boy, nor the day when the boy becomes a man, and yet it is *in a day* that we recognise that the change has in fact taken place. If we take a wider view it seems

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

probable that the events of our time are moving us to recognise that we are living in a waiting time. The prevalence of the word 'crisis,' and our perplexity as we move between the things which are passing away, for which we no longer have any great enthusiasm, and the things which are coming to be, of which we have no sure knowledge, are signs of a growing consciousness that we live between the ages.

Mr. Galsworthy sees modern English society 'with one foot in the air and the other in a Morris Oxford, going round and round like a kitten after its tail, muttering : " If one could only see where one wants to stop ! "' ' Everything,' he says, ' being now relative, there is no longer absolute dependence to be placed on God, Free Trade, Marriage, Consols, Coal, or Caste.' In a different sphere there is a waiting time foreshadowing a crisis in the theory and practice of government, and the strength of both Fascism and Communism is that they recognise the advent of the crisis. In a different sphere again there is a waiting time foreshadowing a crisis for the Churches, and the Group Movement is a

## TELL JOHN

sign that the advent of this crisis also is not unrecognised.

We shall, however, miss the real significance of these various crises unless we see that they are only different expressions of a bigger and more deep-rooted crisis which overshadows our life as men and women. They should help us to recognise that man *as man* lives between the ages. It is the recognition of this fact which alone can create a fruitful agitation in us. For it is in the recognition of this fact that we first become aware of the promise of God.

The promise of God breaks in upon our waiting time. It is then that faith becomes possible. We live under the shadow which the light of the promise of God, shining from beyond the darkness of our waiting time, casts upon our life in the world. Recognising the shadow for what it really is, we become aware of the promise of the light which is obscured by that shadow. In the darkness of the night we come to know that we are waiting for the dawn. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, describing the heroes of faith, says of them, ' these all died in faith,

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar.' They recognised the promise of God. The prophets and great men of the Old Testament are all stamped with this characteristic : they knew that they were called to be watchmen waiting for the fulfilment of the promise of God. ' On my watch tower will I stand, and take my post on the rampart ; I will watch to see what He says to me, and what answer I get back to my plea.' In this respect the New Testament is in agreement with the Old. The quality which, as much as any other, Jesus looked for in His disciples, was an expectant watchfulness. The parable of the ten virgins, the story of the porter, the words about Noah and Lot, together with a great many shorter sayings all point in the same direction.

To what end is this watchfulness demanded of us ? What is it that the men of the Bible are bidden, and feel themselves compelled, to look for ? When we see a sailor on the bridge with his eyes fixed on the horizon, and his whole attitude a witness to the fact that he is on watch, we know that he is looking for

## TELL JOHN

the first sight of another ship. When we see a soldier on guard at his post, we know that his eyes and ears are straining to detect the faintest sign of the movement of the enemy. But in the case of the men of the Bible, and of the sayings of Jesus, we do not so easily understand whence comes this imperative need for watchfulness.

Here we see the first characteristic which marks the promise of God : it is a *bare* promise. The promise is that *God* shall speak, that *God* shall act, that there shall be a *Revelation*. If we immediately go on to ask what does God speaking, God acting, mean, and what is the content of the Revelation, we show by our very framing of this question that it is not the promise of God that we really desire. The promise of God is the promise of God : to ask that it should be something more than this is in fact to ask for something less. Consider that saying of Jesus, ' Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.' This is not the simple moral and religious maxim into which we so easily, all too easily, resolve it. It is as hard a saying as

## AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY

any of His, and such we shall recognise it to be, when we understand that between the asking and the being given, between the seeking and the finding, between the knocking and the being opened, there is no natural sequence of cause and effect, but a *gulf*, which is bridged, and can only be bridged, by the unproved self-proving promise of God. The promise of God breaks in upon the world of human perplexity, struggle, and aspiration, with the assurance of the reality of God. God is certain, God is sure. God lives, God rules, God guides, God loves : His is the kingdom, the power, and the glory : this is the word of promise.

But the promise, though it is a bare promise, is yet a promise made to man. Hence it has a second characteristic. The promise of God is an invitation to man, a demand and claim upon him. Man turns to question God only because God is already questioning him. Every promise in the Gospels will be found on examination to contain an imperative. 'Follow thou Me,' says expressly what is everywhere implied. This is the word of promise spoken to the



## TELL JOHN

individual in the midst of his perplexity, his struggle, and his aspiration, summoning him to choose. The divine invitation must be accepted or refused : it brings man to the crisis of decision, which is also the crisis of judgement.

Man hears the promise of God in the midst of his need : only against this background is the promise understood for what it really is. An examination of that need will make clearer the nature of the promise. ' I have had for years increasingly,' wrote Von Hügel to Tyrrell, ' a double sense of the large, spacious range of our ethical, etc., capacities, and of the necessity and value of an ideal and indefinite exercise for them ; *and* of all this not being God, not one bit, not one bit. Until a man feels this, sees this, till it pierces his soul . . . he has not, I think, waked up to the specifically religious consciousness, or at least, to the central point of its analysis.' In this ' double sense ' there is a tension from which man cannot escape if he is to respond to the promise of God, and if that promise is to be fulfilled in him. His will, his affections, and his mind, must all play

96

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

their part in the understanding of this tension.

Man strives to attain to righteousness. His will and conscience speak to him of duty. In the name of duty he will struggle to realise the ideals which are set before him by parent, master, friend, and revered leader : he will suffer for those ideals, and he will continue with heroic courage to work for their realisation when he has been disappointed not once but many times. In the name of duty he will fight against the evil he finds in his own heart and the evil which he sees crippling the lives of his fellow-men. Custom, code, law, ordinances of Church and State, are the outward and changing forms of the spirit within man which bids him bend his will to the attainment of righteousness. Hence come that groaning and travailing of which St. Paul speaks so understandingly. ' We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.' Waiting, waiting, waiting. How can man go on and on like this ? Because ' by hope were we saved.' But he immediately adds, ' hope that

## TELL JOHN

is seen is not hope, for who hopeth for that which he seeth? But if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.' Here we begin to understand why we can go on waiting. Into this world of our life, where we cannot escape from the continual struggle which duty lays upon us in the name of righteousness, there breaks the promise of the righteousness of God. The promise of forgiveness breaks in upon our struggle with the evil in us and about us. Into the midst of the effort after self-justification there breaks in the promise that God justifies. The light, the kindly light, of the Divine forgiveness has shone into our darkness. The darkness remains, for the shadow is a true shadow, but, praise be to God, the darkness has not overcome the light. The light of the Resurrection illuminates the world which stands under the shadow of the Cross.

Man strives to attain to truth and beauty, that harmony of thought and feeling where his soul is at peace with God and His creation. In the name of truth his mind will wrestle with the ultimate questions of his life, the Whence, the Why, and the Whither of his

## AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY

existence, in order that he may attain to the fullness of a knowledge which satisfies. In the name of beauty he will strive by thought, feeling, and skill, to give that perfect expression to the sense of the unity of the things without and the things within which also satisfies. Once more we may quote Von Hügel : ‘ God, our own souls, all the supreme realities and truths, supremely deserving and claiming our assent and practice,—are both *incomprehensible* and *indefinitely apprehensible*, and the constant vivid realisation of these two qualities insuperably inherent to all our knowledge and practice of them, is of primary and equal importance for us.’ Though it is true that the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing, nor the mind with knowing, this does not mean that man is ever exempt from the demand that he should give himself wholeheartedly to the task of seeing, hearing, and knowing. It *does* mean that in all his work of seeing, hearing, and knowing, he should be waiting for the things ‘ which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God pre-

## TELL JOHN

pared for them that love Him.' This seems to be the sense in which we should understand the words of Jesus, 'the Kingdom of God cometh not with observation ; neither shall they say, Lo here ! or Lo there ! for lo the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.' For every experience of value carries with it a sense of want and need. Man enjoys but is not satisfied. Every recognition of truth carries with it the dim perception of some fuller truth which still lies beyond his ken. Every recognition of beauty awakens a desire to pierce beyond that which he sees and feels to that which he cannot see and feel, yet dimly knows is there. The Kingdom of God is at hand. There is a note of finality in this saying which brings us, as it brought those who first heard it, to the borderland of a new world. That which is at hand is something wholly different from anything we have known or felt or seen. It is as though we should climb to the summit of some hill whence we look across the countryside stretching away at our feet to be lost in the horizon where sky and earth meet in the misty lights of the setting sun, and should

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

know and feel that here is something which cannot be ours. We cannot claim it as our inheritance : rather it claims us ; as Housman wrote,

‘ Comrade, look not on the West,  
’Twill have the heart out of your breast ;  
’Twill take your thoughts and sink them far  
Leagues beyond the sunset bar.’

In his search for truth and beauty, no less than in his desire for righteousness, man is brought to some Garden of Gethsemane where there is no response to the desire and agony in his own heart, and there is nothing further for him to know or will or feel in the name of truth or righteousness. Into this darkness there breaks the promise of God. God’s truth, God’s will, God’s faithfulness, vindicate themselves. ‘ Howbeit not what I will, but what Thou wilt.’ Man has a fore-taste of that knowledge by which he himself is known. Tested to the uttermost Peter hears at last the promise of God, ‘ Lord, Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee.’

The promise of God is, we have said, a bare promise, breaking in upon the life of the

## TELL JOHN

individual man in the midst of his struggle for righteousness, truth, and peace: it invites him, calls him, and claims him. Face to face with the promise of God, in that eschatological moment in which he recognises the promise as promise, he cannot go on with the work of self-justification and self-fulfilment. In that moment God calls a halt; He brings man to the crisis of decision. Man must then acknowledge, or refuse to acknowledge, the promise; he must obey or refuse to obey the summons. In that moment no other course is open to him. The Kingdom of God is truly at hand, but only by penitence and faith can he be born again as a child of the Kingdom. Penitence is the acknowledgment of God's promise, faith is obedience to its call.

The story of Peter in the Gospels gives one of the clearest illustrations of what we are here trying to describe. There seems little doubt that Peter, who, under the shadow of the Cross and the events which led up to the Cross, was brought into the darkness of remorse, disillusionment, and despair, came through that experience to a deep and

## AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY

abiding understanding of the forgiveness, the joy, and the hope, given by God in Christ, which gave a glad radiance to the rest of his life. The words which describe his first call by the lakeside may well be taken as true to his experience of that second call which came to him when the light of the Resurrection broke through the darkness of the Crucifixion. 'And when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught. And Simon answered and said, Master, we toiled all night and took nothing : but at thy word I will let down the nets.' No words could better describe what was to take place at a later date. Peter's experience as a disciple was literally to have toiled all night and taken nothing. It was into the midst of this sense of hopelessness and helplessness, when the world of his hopes had fallen in ruins, that there came the voice of promise, bidding him take up that very task which had proved such a hopeless failure. Readers of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* will remember how Michael Henchard, exiled from his home, his position lost, and his name derided,



## TELL JOHN

found himself at the same spot and in the same condition of life which he had known twenty-three years earlier when he had parted with his wife and child at the fair at Weydon Priors. There was nothing to prevent him making a fresh start except the bitterness of defeat in his own heart. 'He had no wish,' writes Hardy, 'to make an arena a second time of a world that had become a mere painted scene to him.' How aptly the words might describe the condition of Peter on that day when, according to the epilogue of the Fourth Gospel, he said to his companions, 'I go a fishing.'

'Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a draught' was the word of promise. It was a bare word, unsupported by argument or proof, resting on its own inherent power as the promise of God. It was a word of command : it invited to action and called for decision. To that word Peter responded in penitence and faith. No longer striving to accomplish his task in his own name, he yet turns to God in Christ, Who bids him take it up again in His name. No longer believing in himself and the strength of his own

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

promise, he yet turns in trust to God in Christ, obedient to that other promise which remains faithful and sure. 'At thy word I will let down the nets.' Herein are the acknowledgment and the decision which God demands in order that His promise may become fruitful in us. Pride will not easily allow us to surrender the fortress of our own self-justification and self-fulfilment : fear will do its utmost to prevent us making a decision. These two, pride and fear, are the strength of the sin which lies in the heart of man. The root of sin lies in the pride by which man claims to live his life independently of God, and in the fear through which he refuses to obey God's call. The promise of God alone has the power of showing the nature and extent of this claim and of overcoming it.

This leads us to our last point, the manner of the fulfilment of God's promise. Here we must remember that everything that we say cannot really describe the fulfilment of the promise. Since the fulfilment is from God we cannot speak of it without falling into the error, against which this chapter is a protest, of seeming to take to ourselves the promise

## TELL JOHN

which is of God. Nevertheless the attempt must be made to say what we cannot really say. This very attempt is after all, in the sphere of the written word, only an example of what we have insisted throughout is the essential nature of the waiting task of man in every sphere of life.

The heroes of faith of the Epistle to the Hebrews 'died in faith, not having received the promises.' The fact that we can hear the promise of God and respond to it in penitence and trust, and so be reborn as children of the Kingdom, does not mean that we are set free from the tension in which our waiting time between the ages places us. The watchfulness to which we referred earlier as being the characteristic mark of the men of the Old Testament, and the quality repeatedly insisted upon by Jesus, only takes on its peculiar Christian note *after* we have heard the promise of God. This Christian watchfulness is not that with which the business man or the father of a family will watch over the interests of his business or those of his wife and children, nor yet that with which the astronomer will watch night after night the

106

## *AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY*

movements of the stars : it has a different motive from both the enlightened self-interest of the one and the detachment of the other. The watchfulness which marked the porter and the wise virgins in the Gospel stories does not rightly fall into either of these categories. Christian watchfulness accepts the waiting time under the knowledge and the fear of that eschatological moment in which eternity breaks into time, in which life overcomes death, in which God becomes man. From moment to moment of his waiting time the Christian lives in acknowledgment of and obedience to the promise of God. 'Art thou he that cometh or look we for another?' This is Christian watchfulness.

On the eve of the crisis in His own life Jesus spoke to His disciples bidding them prepare themselves for the time of difficulty and stress which lay immediately ahead of them. 'The days will come,' He said, 'when ye shall desire to see one of the days of the Son of man, and ye shall not see it.' Man must wait. He cannot, for all that he has set his heart on it, command the fulfilment of his hopes. Unless we have understood this

## TELL JOHN

we have not begun to understand the truth of the Gospel. There is deep rooted in the Gospel a note of genuine pessimism. That is why writers like Hardy are nearer the heart of things than their more complacent fellows who are too ready to sing, 'God's in His heaven—all's right with the world !' There is of course a shallow pessimism, the pessimism of the world-weary and the cynical, which has no place in the Christian outlook : the true pessimism is felt by those who live at a deeper level than is reached by the world-weary or the cynical : it becomes fruitful when in the midst of his wholehearted search for God man becomes aware that he cannot by his searching find out God.

Once more, 'as the lightning, when it lighteneth out of the one part of heaven shineth unto the other part under heaven ; so shall the Son of man be in his day.' Here is the root of true optimism, the promise of God. But just as there is a shallow pessimism, so there is a shallow optimism which also has no part in a Christian outlook. If we allow ourselves to be carried away by the Lo here ! and the Lo there ! of that kind of optimism

108

## AT MIDNIGHT, A CRY

which would fain substitute for the promise of God something that we can take hold of and possess and distribute, then the promise can never be fulfilled in us. For the optimism which is an essential note of the Christian Gospel comes not of our hopes, but of the hope to which we are called by God. It is only when this deep-rooted pessimism and this deep-rooted optimism are set over against each other, and their origins recognised and acknowledged, that we can begin to see the meaning of the fulfilment of the promise of God. 'First must He suffer many things and be rejected of this generation.'

Only as we come to understand the essential movement of our life in the waiting time between the ages shall we grasp the significance of the note of expectancy in Christian faith. For that movement is through defeat to victory, through uncertainty to certainty, through despair to hope, through death to life. To John in prison came the word, 'the *blind* receive their *sight*, the *dead* are *raised up*.' From out beyond the darkness and the horror of the Crucifixion there breaks in upon the world the cry of triumph, 'It is finished.'



V

*THE DEAF HEAR*

*‘ In that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book.’*

*‘ The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’*

*‘ I do not know it, and I do not understand it, but sounding from above, and ringing in my ears, I hear what is beyond the thought of man.’*

MARTIN LUTHER.

*‘ Go and tell John, . . . the deaf hear.’*





## CHAPTER V

### *THE DEAF HEAR*

‘ I do not know it, and I do not understand it, but sounding from above, and ringing in my ears, I hear what is beyond the thought of man.’ The words are those of Martin Luther, and they are quoted by Karl Barth as a definition of the meaning of Revelation. Side by side with them we may set a sentence from the principal work of Emil Brunner. ‘ Revelation, the Word of God, is the falling of the barrier between God and creature, the coming of that which was from eternity beyond the barrier over the gulf, across which no man can pass, over which no religious, ethical, mystical or speculative rapture can reach, the entering into history of that which by its very nature never can enter into history, because it is eternal.’

‘ In the beginning, God ! ’ Thus begins the Bible, and thus must begin any valid

## TELL JOHN

consideration of the significance of the Word of God, spoken in the Bible. St. Augustine notices the necessity of the prior assent in faith to God as living Creator for the understanding of revelation. 'Begin by acknowledging God,' he writes, 'and you will see that a Revelation is to be expected.' He contrasts with the trust of the Christian in the Creator, the rationalism of his Manichean opponents. 'We,' they say, 'do not ask anyone to believe, without having first investigated and unravelled the truth.'

The true God can only be known if He reveal Himself, and only in revelation can we know the true God. God is self-existent. God is real, and the source of all things real, or non-existent ; a hypothetical God is a no-God. God is Alpha and Omega, author of the cosmic process, and we, created beings, live in His world ; the God who can in any sense find a place in our world, as emergent product of the cosmic process, or as idea or ideal held by the mind of man, is a no-God, a dead objective creaturely thing. God is first, and we and our power of thinking, and our every thought are dependent on Him ;

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

the God of current religion, who is dependent on our arguments and proofs for his right to exist, and dependent on our moral approval for his character, and dependent on our religious experience for his reality, is a no-God, creature and subject of those whom the living God created. The concept of revelation implies that a veil is torn aside, and that beyond the veil is seen, not the darkness of empty space, nor the possibility that there may be light, but the actuality of the light of God.

God is transcendent. The concept of revelation implies that a gulf must be bridged, a barrier broken down. God is not directly identical with anything within the known world, but is strictly unknown apart from revelation. In Himself God is hidden. He is Creator ; we are creature, and all our knowledge is of creatures. He is eternal ; we are temporal, and all our thoughts move in time, and are characterised by the relativity of things temporal. He is transcendent subject ; in Him and on Him our subject-selves depend for their existence ; all our knowledge is of objects, and God can never become one object amongst others in the world objective to us.

## TELL JOHN

God is a living God. As living God takes the initiative in self-revelation. The conception of revelation implies that the activity is from the side of Him who reveals. God is not a being sitting static in Olympian heights, while man discovers and climbs the correct mystic ladder of ascent. God is not a name for the static mountain top of human idealism, a peak toward which man must climb, but which could only by a gross absurdity be supposed to bend down to aid their climbing. It is the abiding value of the Old Testament, amid much that is primitive and outworn, that it stands for the essential Hebrew belief in the living God. It is evident that when, as is sometimes done in recent theology, the word discovery is substituted as a more intelligible and acceptable alternative for revelation, revelation is in fact not explained, but denied and replaced by its opposite. In discovery man is active, the thing discovered is passive, lifeless, waiting to be discovered. A discovered God would be a dead God. In revelation the living God is active and man is the passive recipient of His self-revelation. Only the living God can reveal Him-

116

## THE DEAF HEAR

self, and only with faith in revelation is there faith in the living God. 'Begin by acknowledging God, and you will see that a revelation is to be expected.'

Does this mean a return to an a priori method of reasoning from which three centuries of enlightenment have freed us? Our whole intellectual tradition is steeped in the method of doubt and enquiry inherited from Descartes. We too now pride ourselves, like St. Augustine's opponents, that 'we do not ask anyone to believe, without having first investigated and unravelled the truth.' We shall not of course question the value of doubt and experiment in the knowledge and control of nature. We affirm that scepticism is a duty in every field of intellectual enquiry, including most of all the intellectual study of religion. In a pleasant poem called the *Anticrank*, Sieveking wrote of a man:

' Whose greatest idea,  
Was one that I fear  
Will never become very popular ;  
The Abolition  
Of Superstition,  
They said, " He's not serious—he's jocular ! " '

## TELL JOHN

We have nothing but praise for the Anti-crank's labours. In opening the door to faith we would not open the door to credulity, and the line between them is not easy to draw.

Yet possibly on the question of the acceptance in trust of the reality of the transcendent God, there is rather more at stake than the rival claims of *a priori* and *a posteriori* methods of reasoning. Possibly when, following the example of Descartes, we refuse to trust, and start rather with ourselves and our convictions and our experiences, and evolve God out of a prior belief in ourselves, we have taken the one fatal step away from the living God, and have turned to worship dead gods, the work of men's hands. As we must in all speculative enquiry continually remind ourselves, thought is one function amongst others of personality, personality is not just one concept amongst others in a system of thought ; and the methods proper to the exploration of sub-personal levels of reality make havoc, if they are applied within the higher realm of personal relationship. In the sphere of human personal relationship the method of scepticism and of empirical

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

enquiry is nothing less than the abandonment of the birthright of love. In the sphere of religion it would be necessary that we should abandon our autonomy, and condescend to yield ourselves in trust to another, if at the lowest the Godhead were a person like other persons. The abandonment of autonomy is still more necessary, in that God is not only living and self-existent, but sovereign. The personal relationship of a personal trust in God requires a radically different attitude of mind to the theoretic enquiry as to the validity of theism. The true God may not be put on trial before the judgement seat of our minds ; those who accept His self-revelation will recognise that their minds, and the use they make of them, are on trial before the prior reality of the judgement seat of God. If God be really God, we may not make such a knowledge of truth as we have attained, nor such moral ideals as we at present hold the test of God ; we shall recognise that God is author of our limited vision, and author of a holiness far more than our dull vision comprehends. The living God is not and can never be a ' live option,' a hypothesis at the



## TELL JOHN

end of a chain of reasoning ; when we know God, we know that we do not choose, but are chosen by God. If we disregard these fundamental principles of any religious relationship toward God, and seek to preserve our autonomy in our approach to God, we may use the word God in our vocabulary, but it will be a lifeless thing, or a sub-human thing for which we use that word.

The present cult of dead gods bears mournful witness to the results of men's unwillingness to accept in faith the sovereignty of God. God is a sub-human immanent tendency or *nisus* or urge in the evolving world. God is a vague spirit which finds its highest expression in man, and is really only another name for man at his best. God is a name for man's ephemeral moods of spiritual exaltation. God is a name for man's ideals, a concept, static, and not yet real. God is the next highest step above man, which the universe is engaged in bringing to birth, and as such is creature not Creator of the cosmic process. A frank atheism and a frank despair would be far more honest, and far better for us, than the false comfort of the worship of such

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

dead gods. The Bible is boldly realist in its pessimism with man, and the man-made gods, and it is just for this reason that the Bible is ultimately optimistic. 'All flesh is grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of the grass. The grass withereth, and the flower falleth ; but the Word of the Lord abideth for ever.'

From this digression on dead gods, let us turn to man, the recipient of the revelation of the living God. Revelation in its completeness requires the human spirit that receives the revelation. God is subject ; man must also be present as object. God speaks ; man is spoken to. Moreover, it is not man in general who is the object, the recipient of revelation, but this particular man, here and now in this particular moment.

For second, revelation is always in the present. God from eternity speaks into time, and the vanishing now is the moment at which eternity overshadows time. We cannot hold the revelation as a possession, firmly held and enduring in our human hands. The moment we turn and reflect on it, we have made God an object in our world, and we are no longer in communion with the living God.

## TELL JOHN

If it should come to our lot ever to stand on the mount of revelation, inevitably we shall want to arrest and hold the passing moment ; inevitably we shall cry, ‘ Lord, let us build three tabernacles,’ not knowing what we say ; and as inevitably our request will be denied, for the eternal living God is known only in the moment in which He makes Himself known, and dwelleth not in tabernacles made with human hands.

Thirdly, and this third characteristic will lead us to the consideration of specific modes of hearing the voice of God, God reveals Himself in and through material means, but His revelation is always indirect, never directly identical with those means. In revelation God veils His glory, revealing yet concealing, lest man should perish. The material of revelation is always, to use a Barthian term, ‘ *Hinweis*,’ a pointer, a sign-post. It may point us to the invisible reality of God. Through it God may have spoken and through it He may again speak. But in itself it is no more than dead material. Hence it is always possible to explore the material to the furthest limit and not to find in it the

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

voice of God. It is always possible, when God reveals Himself through the material, to disbelieve in God, and so to find nothing but dead matter in the material. To many in many ways God speaks, but only the believing hear.

These characteristics of the self-revelation of God may become more clear, if we proceed to consider the varied material through which God reveals Himself.

God said, 'Let there be light'; God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters'; God said, 'Let the earth put forth grass.' The first act in the divine drama is when God calls the created world into being. Henceforth, for them that hear, the created world sings the praises of its Creator. 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handy-work.' The possibility of a universal revelation through nature is recognised by St. Paul. 'The invisible things of God from the time of the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.' Jesus would not speak as He does in parables, unless He were continually being spoken to

## TELL JOHN

by the Father in parables, through the ordinary things of the created world. If to us as we go about our daily life the events of the day do not tell the same tale, it may be that our spirits are not open to above as was the Spirit of Jesus. We can of course study the created world in complete separation from God. No amount of scientific study of the natural world will be expected to find God, ranged as one force amongst other forces, within the world which science studies. It is, however, none the less true that there come moments when the world of nature seems to tell of the glory of God.

‘There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem,  
Apparelled in celestial light.’

‘The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the hills  
and the plains—  
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him who  
reigns ?

. . . . .  
And the ear of man cannot hear, and the eye of  
man cannot see ;  
But if we could see and hear, this Vision—were  
it not He ? ’

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

The times which give birth to such lines as these have just as much right to claim a hearing in our interpretation of the world, as has the objective scientific study of the world ; and in such times, for them who trust Him, God most simply and most clearly reveals that His Spirit is Lord of the material world.

God speaks again within the heart of man through conscience and reason. It is false to regard God as in any sense the sum of human idealism or truth ; this is to fall into the fatal double error of making man as he is the measure of God, and of leaving God as a static ideal or concept. It is essential to regard God as the author of human idealism. He speaks to man of a truth which it were a lie not to believe, and of a goodness which it were a sin not to obey. There comes to man with a sense of givenness, a categorical demand for goodness and for justice ; and when we hear that demand we know ourselves either called to action, or it may be condemned for inaction, by a standard which is not of our choosing.

To hear and to recognise the calling of God is not always simple. Here, as in all consider-

## TELL JOHN

ation of the divine action, we must beware of confusing the living reality of God with the human name God, and with all things to which we give that human name. It will always be possible that some are in fact living in obedience to God, who have come to use the word God for some foolish idol, and who therefore in language are apparently vigorous atheists. It will also always be possible that others, who are loyal to the letter of religious traditions and have the word God constantly on their lips, are nevertheless in fact making the living Word of God of none effect, with their formal reverence for the traditions of men. Moreover, in listening to the calling of God, because of the deafness of human ears, self-deception is always possible. We may find ourselves faced with the choice of following the call of God down some path which the wisdom of the world would scorn, and which to ourselves seems foolish, and with the risk all the time that we are after all following not God, but some chance whim of our own, or on the other hand of living by the practical common sense of the world, and therein of being in revolt against the calling of God.

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

There is, however, no escape from the risk of self-deception. There can be no test of the calling of God, for there is no higher court to which we can appeal, beyond the Word of God.

Generally, however, in life if not in our theorising about life, the calling of God is more simple. His Word comes to us with self-authenticating power, and to disobey, as we generally do disobey, is to know ourselves condemned, at least in the first few moments, until we have found for ourselves good moral reasons, wherewith to excuse to ourselves our disobedience.

The revelation of the calling of God is the one absolute authority, in a world where all else is relative. Just because this revelation is radically other-worldly, it is supremely effective in this world. This is not the less true, although its effect, for those who obey, may be to lead to an end, foolishly impracticable judged by the wisdom of the world, such as a Cross.

More particularly God spake to prophet and apostle. They saw a vision of justice and of the perfection of love, which they knew put



## TELL JOHN

both themselves and their contemporaries to shame. They trembled to take the Word of God on their lips, lest through their visionless minds and their cold human speech it become contaminated and perish. 'Woe is me ; for I am undone ; because I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips ; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.' Needless to say this response to the vision of God is not a phase of primitive Old Testament religion superseded in Christ. If we suppose that it is, we show that we do not know the self-revelation of God in Christ. 'Simon Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."' In the teaching of Jesus it is the publican, who stands afar off and dare not lift up his eyes toward God, who comes away from worship justified. Yet though those who hear the Word of God scarcely dare speak, knowing that God has spoken, they dare not keep silence. 'If I say, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name, then there is in mine heart as it were a burning fire.' 'Woe is me,' cries St. Paul, 'if I preach not the Gospel.' Prophet

128

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

and apostle proclaimed their vision of God to their fellow-men, and thus to us bequeathed our Bible.

Of course the men to whom God spake were human beings, with a place and a date in history. Of course, so soon as they would think or speak or write, they must use human words, words wholly human, and therefore in no smallest measure divine. The whole of the material of the Bible is temporal and worldly. If we would seek within the Bible matter for the reconstruction of Hebrew history, we shall find that its whole content lies ready to our hand for that purpose. If we want to compare the religious theories and the religious experiences of the Jews with those of other people, we shall find in the Bible a rich store-house for comparative religion. If we are interested to construct and stock a museum of quaint and curious folklore, the Bible will furnish us with abundant material for that purpose. If we study critically the word of the Bible, we shall find just very human words. The only mistake will be if we suppose that such pursuits as these have anything whatever to do with theology, in its

## TELL JOHN

proper sense, that is with the Word of God. The merely historical and critical study of Biblical texts is a perfectly proper and valuable branch of human enquiry, but it has just as much, and just as little to do with theology, as the similar study of any other classical texts. The study of the material of revelation may provide an occasion for the self-revelation of God ; the most accurate human study of human words will never become equivalent with the self-revelation of God.

The true value of the Bible is that as the inherited material of revelation, it serves as a pointer beyond itself to the living God. Indirectly present, hidden as well as revealed, there are in the Bible, ' not the right human thoughts about God, but the right divine thoughts about man.' In one clear picture Karl Barth puts this, the true significance of revelation in the Bible. ' We all know the curiosity that comes over us, when from a window we see the people in the street suddenly stop and look up . . . shade their eyes with their hands, and look straight up into the sky toward something which is hidden

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

from us by the roof. Our curiosity is superfluous, for what they see is doubtless an aeroplane. But as to the sudden stopping, looking up, and tense attention characteristic of the people of the Bible, our wonder will not be so lightly dismissed.'

We only understand the history in the Bible, when we recognise that here, present but not seen, there is something more outside history, but on the threshold of history. The history is intelligible, only if we grant that there was some reason why the men in the Bible stood in that strange position, their eyes shaded, looking up. Perhaps then too we may stand tense, conscious that there is something which as yet we do not see, looking up. We may become like that friend, hammering on the doors of heaven in the impotency of need, and like the servants who were not in drunken sleep at the moment when their Lord came. Perhaps then God through the dead material of the dead words may break with His light into the darkness of our minds. Only then will the revelation be complete. 'The Word of God,' writes Barth, 'takes place also to-day in the Bible,

## TELL JOHN

and apart from this present happening it is not the Word of God but a book like all others'; and again, 'When we open and read the Bible, it is not enough that in all good will, and in all attentiveness we finger its lines, and sit, and puzzle over its meaning. If the Bible is not to remain to us a dark land, something more is needed, the Spirit which makes the letter live. . . . Yet even for us there have been hours, when as we wandered through the Bible, as through a dark land, suddenly something in the Bible shone out, and for a moment we pierced to its inmost meaning. The Spirit of God had come forth in light and born witness to our spirit.' 'I do not know it,' said Luther, 'and I do not understand it, but sounding from above, and ringing in my ears, I hear what is beyond the thought of man.'

Central in the Bible, and central in revelation, there is the second act in the divine drama, the self-revelation of God in Christ. To prophet and apostle the Word of God came from afar, as alien to themselves, and they heard and feared. Here the Word of God is spoken in and through a human per-

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

son. God in person declares His mind to men, in and through the human life, and the human personality of Jesus of Nazareth. Here again the revelation is indirect. The living Word of God is not directly identical with the human Jesus. It is possible to study objectively to the full the human figure of Jesus, and not to hear the self-revelation of God. We may if we can take the human Jesus as example of the way that man should live, and choose Him as our guide and hero. To do this is far better, as He himself would say, than to give theoretic lip-service to the most lofty doctrine of incarnation. To rest content with this, and to attempt of our effort to follow the example of Jesus, is to rest in Judaism, the religion of the law, and to find ourselves led to that abyss where the humbling cry is wrung from us, 'the good that I would, that I cannot do.' To go beyond hero-worship of the human Jesus, and to reverence the man Jesus as God, is not to accept the Incarnation, but to fall into idolatry, worship of the creature, worship of an object of our choosing. For here too the revelation is not complete until it is heard

## TELL JOHN

and believed in the present moment. The Godhead of Christ is not identical with this human nature, but is the hidden secret of the person, revealed only to them that believe. God reveals Himself in Jesus, not when men hold any theory however correct of the Incarnation, nor when men recognise the supremacy of Jesus amongst men, but when God in Christ proclaims His love, and claims our allegiance to His love, and when men hear and believe and obey. We may or may not believe in the revelation of God in the Incarnation. We should at least be clear that what that means, whether we believe or disbelieve, is not the self-evident truth that Jesus was supreme amongst men in His love, nor the general principle that love is an excellent ideal for us to hold before us ; it means that the transcendent eternal God proclaimed and proclaims, in and through the life of the human Jesus, to an estranged humanity, that He loves them despite their revolt against him, and that He calls them back without condition into allegiance to Himself.

✓ One last sphere of revelation may claim a moment of attention, namely the theology of

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

the Church, and in particular the summary of that theology in orthodox creed. Here perhaps most especially it is important to notice that the material, the word and the thought of the theology, is not in itself the revealed Word of God, but only a pointer toward the God who reveals. For none is faith harder than for the theologian ! Constantly the danger is at hand to withhold the response of trust to the living Word of God, and to substitute the easy holding by the mind alone of some theory, correct or incorrect, about God. The orthodox theology does not profess to give a correct intellectual account of a world to which human intellectual terms are adequate ; that is the attempt of the heresies set aside by the orthodox theology ; to turn the orthodox theology into this is to make nonsense of it. To believe in the Creeds is another form of idolatry, the placing of trust in the dead, creaturely concept. The task of the Christian is to believe, if he can, with the Creeds in God. The dogma of the Trinity, considered as the correct intellectual formula for describing a conceptual godhead, is irreverent nonsense.



## TELL JOHN

The dogma of the Trinity is a pointer away from all human thoughts toward the living reality of God. It points toward the one God, in whose world as Creator we live, who declares His forgiveness and love to us in Jesus Christ, who sets His Spirit in our hearts that our dull ears may be opened to hear His revelation. When we understand the doctrine, then we recognise that it is true that he that believeth not in the living God is damned in the faithlessness of a heart, dead without faith. This is our faith, not in human words or theories, orthodox or heterodox, but in the transcendent, personal, living, self-revealing God.

This is our faith ; but how shall we know ? In the beginning, God ? Or in the beginning and at the end, material chaos ? The heavens declare the glory of God ? Or the heavens know no glory, but that of their own iron material laws ? Moments there may come, when as it seems the thin veil of a material world is torn aside, and the Spirit of God bears witness to our spirit. How shall we know that such times in fact bear witness to a world of transcendent spirit, and do not

## *THE DEAF HEAR*

rather bear witness to our own over-heated emotions? How do we know that the Word of God was indeed in Christ, proclaiming divine forgiveness? Jesus we know, or think we know. 'Is not this Jesus, whose father and mother we know? how doth He now say, I am come down out of heaven?'

In the commonly accepted sense of knowledge, we do not know. There is no test or proof of revelation. It is sufficiently evident, from the opposition at Calvary, and in all ages, that revelation is uncertain, that it is possible to doubt and to reject the authority of divine revelation. It is further evident that in the nature of the case there can be no proof, since if God speak in revelation, there can be no higher court of appeal, where His message could be tested and authenticated. In the view of St. Paul discerning of Spirits is not the work of human powers, but is itself the gift of the Spirit. And at heart we know that this is right. The Word of God in self-revelation comes with self-authenticating power, and though our intellect may find reasons for disbelief, it is not really our intellect which takes offence at it. God speaks

## TELL JOHN

through the created world, through reason and conscience, through Bible and Creed and Sacrament, through the life of Him in Whom His Word is Incarnate. To assent to the revelation is to recognise that we live in responsibility, under orders, in a world not our own. To assent is to believe with our whole personality, with heart and will as well as mind. To assent is to acknowledge the claim of the sovereignty of God, over just the last spheres of life where most we would retain autonomy. To assent is to acknowledge that we in our life are in revolt against God, to admit the fact of sin, to acknowledge that we are sinful in ignorance if we fail to hear His word, and yet more sinful in will, if having heard we fail to believe and obey. To assent is to accept the Word of forgiveness, spoken by God in Christ, and to acknowledge the claim which the graciousness of the forgiveness of God makes on our lives. To believe in revelation is to answer yes, with mind and will, to the most simple content of revelation, that we are no longer a lord to ourselves, but that God is indeed God, and that we stand before Him as men.

VI

*THE BLIND SEE*

*‘ One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now  
I see.’*

*‘ The clerēness of Godēs light  
Shone on him, no sun so bright.’*

ANON.

*‘ Go and tell John, . . . the blind receive their sight.’*



## CHAPTER VI

### *THE BLIND SEE*

‘A CERTAIN blind man sat by the wayside begging ; and hearing the multitude going by, he inquired what this meant. And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. And he cried, saying, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me. And they that went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace ; but he cried out the more a great deal, Thou son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto him ; and when he was come near, he asked him, What wilt thou that I should do unto thee ? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight ; thy faith hath made thee whole. And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God ; and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.’

## TELL JOHN

A blind beggar by the wayside of life : that is a picture of man on earth. Naked we come into the world, and naked we leave it ; and for a short time we hold out hands as beggars in it, for what the world has to offer. Food and drink and clothing we ask for ; we should like in addition our share, and perhaps a little more than our share, of the world's enjoyments ; if it may be, we ask that the gifts shall come with a word of good cheer and sympathy from our fellow-men. In days of distress, of universal trade depression, we learn the more readily to recognise ourselves in this rôle of beggar. We are not the less in fact beggars in days of prosperity, when for a moment of generosity the world showers its treasures on us.

Then to our ears, as we sit by the wayside of life, there comes the rumour of a passing crowd. Prophet and apostle and martyr, advancing down the ages, bear witness that to us, here in this world, Christ is at hand. To some, if not to all in this present world, there comes the knowledge of the existence and the closeness of God.

What then shall we say ? At first we keep up

## *THE BLIND SEE*

our habitual beggar's cry for alms. We utter more loudly and more impatiently the cry which has long been on our lips, 'Lord, have mercy, have mercy.' The only difference which religion, the knowledge of God, makes, is that some men address to God that cry which all along all men have been making to one another, the cry for food and drink, for enjoyment and for a word of comfort. At heart we remain the same : self-seeking, acquisitive beggars. If it be true that God is at hand, we will make a convenience of Him. God, if there be a God, shall make Himself useful for our purposes. We will rely on His added power for the securing of our needs. Religion too shall be added as another, if perhaps a more refined, pleasure, amid the competing pleasures of the world. The interest of the study of the Bible shall compete with the interest of the study of other literature ; the pleasure of religious emotion shall compete with the pleasure of other forms of emotional satisfaction. Not long ago, in a letter in a Church paper, there appeared the suggestion that what the Church needed to do to restore her fallen fortunes,



## TELL JOHN

was to meet this demand, and to make her services more enjoyable than Sunday cinemas. At first in religion, yes, and for long days, the heart of man is unchanged. The religious differ from the rest of the world, only in that they seek their pleasures in a more refined form ; and that merely means that in religion the pride and the acquisitiveness of men is hardened in a form from which it is all the harder to escape.

But Christ, of whose coming presence the rumour spake, in fact comes near. He calls us to Him from our seat by the roadside. When we are near, He puts to us the question, ' What wouldst thou that I should do unto thee ? ' What if with that question, coming to us from Him, the thought breaks into the darkness of our minds, that alms, food and drink and pleasure, even sympathy, are not our real needs ! What if we learn, as we hear Him, that here is one whom we have never seen ! We are beggars, yes, but blind beggars, and beggars because we are blind, and likely to remain beggars so long as we are blind. We go through life, groping our way in the dark from step to step, not knowing

## *THE BLIND SEE*

whither we go. We are shut up in the dark circle of our own minds. We have sought perhaps to find God within the circle of our own idealism, but always our desires have been our real master and we have never seen the living God. With one flash of light in the darkness of our minds there comes the recognition that our real need is, not for alms but for sight.

The gift of alms would leave us still as we were, asking for further alms. Sight would transform us, ridding us of our beggary. Only through utter blindness of the purpose of God have we sat inactive, expecting the world and all things in it to revolve round us, ministering to our idle needs. Beggars because we are blind ; if that is true of the individual it is still more true of society. Through a deathly blindness of the uniting purpose of God, we suffer our economic life to perish from the sickness of a society acquisitive and disintegrated. In recurring cycles from satisfied greed we plunge ourselves back into literal beggary, while all the undeveloped wealth of nature is there waiting for us to claim and share.

## TELL JOHN

The question comes from God, 'What wouldest thou that I should do unto thee?' Dare we recognise our blindness and ask not for alms but for sight? Dare we ask that which before we have never dreamt to ask? It is God not man at hand. Shall we not therefore ask from God, that which we could not and should not ask from man? Shall we not ask from God the thing incredible, the miracle? Shall we not as He questions us change our beggar's cry, and with one flash of courage answer, 'Lord, that I may receive my sight!'

Only in faith shall we ask this other, this wholly different thing. Faith believes before it sees. Faith stretches out hands into the darkness to God, confident that beyond our present world of darkness there is a world of sight as yet unseen. Faith has the courage to ask from God the unexpected and incredible. Faith dares to bare from men the reproach of absurdity, while it expects from God that which on the human level none could expect. Faith defies that easy human wisdom which would limit the possible always to the usual and conventional. Faith is sure that with

## *THE BLIND SEE*

God there is power to achieve the wholly new, the unconventional, the impossible. Such is the faith that with one flash of insight asks for sight. To such faith there comes the second word from God, 'Thy faith hath made thee whole.'

And what then? What if God grant the miracle of sight? What shall we see? To ask that question is to show that we are blind and not even as yet aware of our blindness. From God and from God alone comes the vision, and no human words can foresee it or foretell it before it comes. Yet equally the attempt must be made to tell of the new world revealed by God, in the hope that in the telling God may find material wherewith to work the miracle, and to grant the vision.

We shall be like men who for a long day have walked in thick enshrouding mist. So long the clouds have weighed down around us that we have ceased to expect to see. Suddenly there is a break, a rift in the mist ahead; and there, dazzling clear, we behold the Cross, the light of the glory of God in the face of the crucified Christ. We see the landscape of the world lit in this light. We see

## TELL JOHN

ourselves, our generation, standing there, before the centuries, around the Cross. We see the light and the shadow of the Cross, here, in the present, overshadowing this our day.

The deep black shadow of the Cross lies across the world, blacker than all the empty darkness of our former lack of sight. From the Cross there comes the judgement of God on a world estranged from God. In its shadow the proud are humiliated and the mighty put down from their seat. Where before we saw the might and the glory of efficient government, now we see rulers, like Pilate, giving the lie to justice rather than face the disapproval of the people. Where before we saw the Church, proud in its holiness, now we see a very human society, self-righteous and self-seeking, joining with Pharisee and Sadducee to crucify the Christ.

We see a Church, constantly jealously guarding its own inherited opinions, turning its back on new truth, and making the living Word of God of none effect, by its care for the traditions of men. We see a Church, constantly caring for its own membership and

## *THE BLIND SEE*

its own immediate prosperity, and claiming from men for itself the honour which it exists to give to God. We see a Church continually selling its birthright of beholding God for the pottage of immediate practical success and the favour of men. We cannot remember too often that it was the religious of the world, a religious society far more effective and efficient in organisation than anything which has since been able to take its place, which brought Our Lord to the Cross. Thereafter a Church which is not deeply penitent, deeply aware of its own human limitations and imperfections, and constantly self-critical, has no right to the name Christian. It is no accident that those who attend the services of the Church are asked, not once for all, but each new time they come, to acknowledge that they are sinners, devoid of health before God. It is just here, as members of the Church, thinking themselves to be pious and justified by their piety, that they must recognise that they stand afar off from God : a self-contented piety is of all things furthest removed from God ; His children can only be justified if He in His Grace

## TELL JOHN

receive them to Himself. If the Church which puts the confession in the forefront of its services be really sincere, it will be ever ready to accept the worst that men can say in criticism, knowing that through the open knowledge of its own defects, far more than through any claim of superiority for its merits, it may point men to the saving love which comes not from man but from Christ.

Ourselves too we shall see humiliated ; indeed if we do not see the humiliation of ourselves, we have no right to see humiliation anywhere else. We thought to count ourselves as moral or religious. We thought to know ourselves to be at least no worse, and perhaps somewhat better than the majority of our fellow-men. Now we are forced to know ourselves, judged, not by conventional human standards, but by the standard of the holiness of God made known in Christ. Now for an instant seeing, we know thereby the measure of our blindness. For an instant believing, we know our lack of faith. ' Lord, I believe,' we say, and at once, ' help Thou mine unbelief.' All that we know is that we stand in Peter's place, time and again deny-

## *THE BLIND SEE*

ing Our Lord in the one moment of crisis, when He most demands our loyalty.

Then in the Cross we see out of our darkness, light transforming the world. We hear the cry of Forgiveness. We learn that God still loves this world, even in its darkness, and welcomes it back into fellowship with Himself. Now in the light of the love of God the meek are exalted. Humble things take on a new dignity and a new charm, as we know them to be part of the world, created by God through Christ, and by Christ redeemed. Humble people are seen in a new light, as they are seen forgiven and loved of God. Our own life has a wholly new, wholly different value, when having learnt its worthlessness, we learn now that to God it is nevertheless of infinite worth. We know, not in theory but in fact, that having done all we shall be unprofitable servants ; and just for that reason we go forth, anxious to do all, and with the aid of God far more than our all.

The material created world is seen in a new light. We no longer expect it to revolve round us, catering only for our enjoyment. We no longer want to lay human acquisitive hands



## TELL JOHN

on it wherever we can. No longer begging for enjoyment for our own sake, regarding the world with simple wonder, we discover a new enjoyment, such as before was never ours. Our old sophisticated self has died under the judgement of God, and we regard the world now, like the child, with simple, unspoilt admiration. 'What! it will be questioned,' wrote Blake, 'when the sun rises do you not see a round shape like a guinea? Oh! No! No! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty.'

The outcasts among men (and who is not now an outcast?) are seen in a new light. Where before we saw with eyes of contempt one under an eternal stigma for having stolen, now we see a penitent thief exalted to the place of honour at the right hand of God. Our own life direction is reversed in the new vision. We no longer expect men to revolve round ourselves, ministering to our needs; we no longer favour the generous and the attractive and the good. Our life-direction is now the same as that of God Himself, forgetful of self, self-giving toward the world.

## *THE BLIND SEE*

Now if we have a favourite, our special love goes out to those who are most weak, most isolated of men, and who therefore most need our care.

‘ The children playing in the market place,  
The widow by the bier,  
The sinner passing with averted face,  
The fallen woman’s tear,  
I heeded not ; nor ever thought to make  
Service to them my law,  
Till Jesus spoke to me beside the lake,  
And touched me ; . . . and I saw.’

Once more we ask, what then ? What if God perform the miracle and open our eyes ? What if we see in the Cross, no longer the outward form of a human martyrdom, which all men see, nor even a supreme example of human love, but God in person proclaiming forgiveness to men, demanding the full allegiance of their answering love in return ? What if we see in the Bible, no longer merely fallible human theorising about God (though this we shall always rightly see in the Bible), but also God, revealing Himself to men, calling men aside to behold His glory ? What will be our fate in this world, as we turn

## TELL JOHN

back to live in a world transformed in the light of this vision ?

Ours will be the fate of the prophet Jeremiah. ' If I speak, I am become a laughing stock all the day, everyone mocketh me ; and if I say, I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name, then there is in mine heart as it were a burning fire.' That is true religion. We shall live in a constant tension, on the one hand called by God to proclaim His purpose to the world, and ridiculed by the world if we answer ; on the other hand called by the world to accept the conventional, practical, sane worldly standards, and oppressed by God if we answer. True religion is not something which makes life easier than before ; it is not a new enjoyment competing with and outweighing other worldly enjoyments ; it is a burden, heavy to be born, yet inescapable. Is that a hard saying ? Yes, a very hard saying, particularly to modern ears. But the more important question is not whether it is hard, but whether it is true.

In Mr. H. G. Wells's story, a stranger finds his way into a land where all men are blind.

## *THE BLIND SEE*

He expects that men will honour him for his sight. Full of hope, he quotes to himself the proverb, as he goes amongst them, 'In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king.' His hopes are rudely shattered. He finds 'they would believe and understand nothing he told them. For fourteen generations these people had been blind, and shut off from all the seeing world. The names of all the things of sight and of colour had changed.' When the traveller made use of the words appropriate to the things of sight and of colour they told him not to use senseless words ; and when he persisted they said he was mad. 'Has no one told you,' the stranger said to one of the blind men, 'that in the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king?' 'What is blind?' said the blind man, carelessly, over his shoulder.

That was the fate of Jesus Himself. He came preaching of another world which He saw from within this world, and which He called the Kingdom of Heaven. He saw in the purposes of God for human life, possibilities of which others dare not dream. He lived and acted in full accord with this other

## TELL JOHN

world which He saw. He found that men would believe and understand nothing that He told them, and He marvelled at their lack of faith. When He persisted, His friends came to lay hands on Him to take Him away, for they said He was mad. The leaders of religion, those better trained in the refined wisdom of this world, produced the more refined explanation, that He was possessed by the prince of devils. As the wise rejected His teaching as unintelligible folly, so it was the fools of the world who saw its sense. Children as yet untrained in worldly wisdom, sinners who were outlawed by worldly wisdom, demoniacs driven mad by worldly wisdom, these heard and understood and loved Him, and acclaimed Him as the Son of God.

This was the fate which Jesus promised to His disciples. He assured them that the goal lay before them, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Then, as the climax of the blessings which lay in store for them, as the destiny of them that see, he assured them, 'Blessed are ye when men shall persecute you and revile you, and say

## *THE BLIND SEE*

all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake ; rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven ; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.' This was the promise to St. Paul. After his vision, the highest promise to a follower of Christ is offered, ' I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.' The promise did not fail. St. Paul found himself after his vision amid a conflict of rival wisdoms, each regarding the other as folly, each persecuting the other unto death. He learnt to recognise from the bitter experience of the result of his own preaching that the Cross was to the Greeks, the wise of the world, just silly, and to the Jews, the religious of the world, offensive. Despite the mockery of the wise of the world, he persevered, confident that God had chosen the things that were foolish to confound the things that were wise.

Is it likely to be different to-day ? We long inevitably for the approval of our fellow-men. Is the approval of the world now a test of the purity of Christian preaching ? Is the wisdom of the world by now identical with the

## TELL JOHN

The present religious situation is far too urgent for the Church to continue to be occupied with merely harmless activities. Let the Church take up again its proper function of calling men to face in full realism the vision of the crucified Christ. Let the Church demand of its members, not the easy compromise of a tithe to God and nine-tenths for self, but the one thing lacking, the dedication of all to the service of God. Let the Church dare like its Master to face the complete loss of its following, rather than countenance one shadow of disloyalty to the God of love. I do not doubt that if the Church were to become militant, it would find that the world had also still the power to become militant, and that it would not forfeit the blessing of those who are persecuted, slandered and reviled.

To this tension the miracle of the opening of our eyes will lead. We shall find ourselves placed in the no-man's-land, between the lines where the war is waged between the Kingdom of God and the republic of men. We may not pass over and take refuge in the Kingdom, for we are men, living the life of

160

## *THE BLIND SEE*

men on earth. We cannot escape the limitations of our manhood. We are and we remain members of a society which does not see God. To seek to escape from the secular society in which we live, and to seek for some refuge where the pride of man is no longer at war against God, is only to become the more aware of that pride in our own hearts. Yet if once we have seen the light of God in the face of Christ, we cannot take our place in the human lines. We can no longer bear to play our part as officer or private in the republic of men. We know that human society is organised in revolt against God. We belong to a rebel camp, and all we can do is to rebel in turn against the rebellion. We may not complain if for that we meet the rebel's fate.

How wise if we had never uttered in sudden courage that foolish prayer ! How fortunate if we could play our part with easy conscience amid our fellow-men ! Yet this we shall never say. In the moment of vision there was a joy which outweighs all possible cost that may result from obedience to the vision. One thing is certain : those who have seen will never for one moment desire to reverse



## *TELL JOHN*

their prayer, and cry, ‘ Lord, give me again my blindness !’ Rather through the utmost darkness of loneliness or shame or death they will be held joyful in the memory of the vision, and will pray from moment to moment that the vision may be renewed. Through all the tension and all the difficulties of this present world, they will give glory to God, who has created, and who will redeem ; and the multitude of them that follow after, seeing their miracle of vision, with them will join in giving praise to God.

## VII

### THE DEAD ARE RAISED

*' Every one that drinketh of this water shall thirst again : but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst ; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life.'*

*' And the new word means nothing to us,  
it is such an old word,  
till we admit how dead we are,  
till we actually feel as blank as we really are.'*

D. H. LAWRENCE, *Pansies*

*' I am the resurrection and the life.'*

*' Go and tell John . . . the dead are raised up.'*



## CHAPTER VII

### *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

THE woman who justified her frequent visits to the public-house on the ground that for the price of the spirits she consumed she could 'get away from Bethnal Green,' was bearing witness to a universal need of human nature. With the help of alcohol she was able to overcome for the moment the sense of failure and frustration in her life, and to forget the monotony and dreariness of its outward circumstances. The lady of fashion who spends every night of the season in a whirl of social engagements, is acting, whether consciously or unconsciously, in response to the same need as that which sends her less affluent neighbour to the public-house. Even the eminent professor of theology who gives the last hour of his day to an earnest study of crime, as portrayed for him by Mr. Freeman Wills Croft, will plead guilty to a mild

## TELL JOHN

attempt to effect a similar escape. Drink, night-clubs, and detective fiction have this point in common : they are means of getting away from Bethnal Green, or Berkeley Square, or the theological lecture-room. Football grounds are crowded, theatres, cinemas, and dance halls are full, because they provide the most effective means for thousands of men and women to get away from their offices, their workshops, and their homes, and from the sense of frustration and futility in their own lives.

The important point is not that we should attempt to sit in judgement upon the stock-broker who spends his Sundays on the golf course, and the shopgirl who spends her evening at the pictures, nor yet to estimate the relative values of all the different forms of escape, from play-going to pillion-riding, that life provides, but rather that we should understand the deeper need which underlies all these activities. That need is for life. Man's deepest desire is for life, a life which is full, free, creative, and triumphant over all obstacles. Behind all the instincts by which man is moved there beats the pulse of the

## *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

desire for life. It is in response to this desire that the scarcely conscious infant seeks its mother's breast, and that the young child makes its first efforts to crawl, to walk, to speak, and to ask its ceaseless questions. It is the desire for life which brings men and women together in friendship and love, for therein they discover new springs of life which they had not known before. All science, all art, all literature, are manifestations of man's insatiable craving for an ever richer, fuller, and more triumphant power of living.

Most men and women experience at times, in one form or another, the sense that they are living life to the full. The craftsman who sees his work taking on the shape and form which he desires, as he moulds it with his hands, lives for the moment more richly in the joy of his creation. The woman who has brought her first child into the world, finds a sweetness in life, which not only compensates her for the weary months of waiting and the agony of her labour, but also gives her a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction unknown to her before. To be absorbed in the interpretation of great music, or in the action of

## TELL JOHN

the characters of a play or a book, is to be lifted on to a higher plane of living. To give oneself in friendship and love, and to be received by friend and lover in return, is to experience a form of enrichment of life that most people cannot fail to find. In all such experiences we are lifted out of the valley, where we habitually live, on to the hill tops, whence we catch a glimpse of a new and unexplored country, and where the breath of new life refreshes our tired spirits.

Such experiences are rare, and are by no means always at our command. The moment of experience passes, and no effort of ours will recover it. Our discovery of what life might be only leaves us the more acutely aware that as we go about our day's work we are not truly living. Our appetites have been whetted but our hunger is unsatisfied. Moreover, we cannot live long as fully awakened beings without becoming aware that there is another factor at work in our experience of life, which militates against our efforts to find a richer and fuller life, and tends to rob us of that very desire which is the mainspring of those efforts. As fully conscious human

## THE DEAD ARE RAISED

beings, we become aware of a conflict in our life, a conflict which shows itself in an inward and an outward form, corresponding to the two fields of our experience.

This conflict makes itself felt within the field of our own personality as we become aware of the gulf between our ideal self and our actual self, between what we fain would be and what we come to recognise that we are. Sooner or later we wake up to the realisation that we are jealous, proud, acquisitive, idle, thoughtless, that we lack courage, constancy, and determination. There is all the difference between knowing the possibility of these things being in us, and knowing that they are in us. It is one of the most crushing experiences that life can bring, to find desires, of whose real existence we were doubtful, welling up in us and driving us to acts of selfishness and folly, which we know full well destroy the beauty of life, and rob us of the fulfilment of our desire for a more abundant life.

This same conflict also makes itself felt in the field of our outward experience, as we become aware that the circumstances which



## TELL JOHN

surround our life, and the course of events to which we are subject, are not such as naturally tend to promote a fuller enjoyment of life. Both circumstances and events often conspire to rob life of its richness. Uncongenial work, an unhappy home, sickness, the competitive struggle for existence, besides those greater calamities of fire, shipwreck, war, and sudden death, force us to recognise that the pattern into which our life is being woven is not always of our choosing. Sooner or later every man is awakened to the gulf between the course of his life as it actually develops and the course which in his dreams he would like it to follow.

Our awareness of this double conflict, within and without, which eats like a cancer at the root of our desire for life, passes through two stages. In the first, we set ourselves to fight against the evil in our own life, and against the adverse circumstances in which we are involved, determined to overcome the one, and to circumvent the other. In the second, we still struggle to make ourselves masters of the situation in which we find ourselves, but now we know, in the depths of

## *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

our soul, that we are fighting a losing battle ; it is then, and only then, that the conflict becomes a conflict in real earnest.

In the midst of this struggle we begin to understand the cry of St. Paul, ' O wretched man that I am ! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death ? ' It is in the midst of this struggle also that we first lay hold on the hope of Resurrection, which is the new life from God. That new life comes to us as we face in full reality both our desire for life, and our complete inability to find for ourselves the way of fulfilment of that desire. St. Paul passes immediately from his cry of despair to a cry of victorious confidence, ' thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' The power of God is set over against the weakness of man, the victory of God is set over against the defeat of man, the new life in Christ is set over against the old life of man, which is dominated by the forces of sin and death. Between man's desire and God's fulfilment there is no continuity ; there is no development from one to the other. We must die to live. We must learn through defeat and death to stretch out our hands

## TELL JOHN

beyond ourselves, and beyond our utmost powers, for the life which we receive as a gift from God. It was because D. H. Lawrence understood this that he was able to write of the New Word, Resurrection,

‘ And the new word means nothing to us,  
it is such an old word,  
till we admit how dead we are,  
till we actually feel as blank as we really  
are.’

Only as we have understood, and entered into, this sense of need, can we take to ourselves that other cry of triumph, ‘ thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’

The moment of death is the moment of life. The moment of complete darkness of all things human is the moment when the light of God breaks through, flooding all with His glory. Jesus Himself was brought to such a moment. ‘ The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified.’ For Him too there was the agony of struggle : ‘ Now is my soul troubled ; and what shall I say ? Father, save me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.’

## THE DEAD ARE RAISED

Let us clearly understand that the new life from God is not a means of escape from the inward conflict and adverse circumstances of our life. The promise is not of escape from the conflict, but of victory *in* it. Resurrection means that a new quality of living has entered into our life ; it does not mean a different kind of life, set amidst different circumstances, but a new way of living this kind of life, amidst the same circumstances. The woman in Bethnal Green took, what was for her, the shortest cut ; we find it easy to condemn her method. But the real point is that there are no short cuts to the fulfilment of our desire for life. We must be careful not to be deceived by those who would try to persuade us that religion is the most efficacious of all short cuts. For religion too may be turned into a way of escape. There is a flight to prayer or church, which is just an attempt to escape from the world, which, like all such attempts, leaves us firmly rooted within the world from which we escape. To attempt to make the religion of man the pathway from this life to the Resurrection life is the sin of Pharisaism, and it is doomed to the failure

## TELL JOHN

and the condemnation of Pharisaism. Of religion thus conceived, as of those other ways of escape, drink, dance, and detective drama, to which it is similar, it is truly written, 'whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again.'

If we continue to ask, unlike St. Paul, 'what' shall deliver us from the burden life places upon us, we show that we are not yet fully in earnest in the struggle in which we are involved. To demand such a 'what,' is to refuse to acknowledge the condition upon which alone we can receive the gift of new life from God. It is only when we acknowledge the claim of another 'Who,' cutting right across our desire to find our own self-justification and self-fulfilment, that the new life can be born in us. When we make that acknowledgment, when we turn to God, the Living God, in the midst of our conflict, and with our desire for life still strong but yet unsatisfied, then there comes the gift of new life, which transforms our dying life. If now we call this new life religion, we do not mean what is commonly meant by that word to-day. We do not mean a personal experience, nor

## *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

any human mood or state of soul, nor any method of worship organised or unorganised. Religion, as we now mean it, is the life bound to God ; not the offering to God of the activity of man, but the acceptance by man of the activity of God. Of the desolation of man, and of the gift of a new life from God, and of this alone, is it written, ‘ whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst ; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life.’

Thus at last we come to know that God takes man to Himself, bringing to his halting steps the strength which enables him to walk serene, though sorely tried, along the path of life ; He gives new strength to all man’s faculties, bringing into his whole life’s movement a fresh dynamic power. Although man is still forced to struggle with the powers of sin, decay, and death, and although in that struggle he suffer pain, loss, and defeat, yet now he knows that through it all, and over it all, there is given to him a life which holds the promise of an ever deepening richness, joy, and creative power, and which brings a

## TELL JOHN

contentment and fulfilment which are finally satisfying.

Resurrection means that we live under the sovereignty of God's grace. We no longer stand condemned before the tribunal of conscience, because we have been acquitted by the free pardon of God. The light of the knowledge of God's forgiveness has overcome the darkness of the failure of our struggle for good. Standing afar off, like the penitent publican, we learn that God has reconciled us to Himself. He has already given us, of His free favour, those privileges which we desired to earn for ourselves, and yet could never win. We sought to discover for ourselves the secret of the good life, but when we understood the real vanity of our efforts, the mystery was revealed to us in the goodness of God. The forgiveness of God is the word of new life, which breaks in upon the sense of failure, frustration, and hopelessness, to which the moral struggle of conscience, when it is pursued in earnest, brings us. It is the final word of comfort to the self-condemned, 'thy sins are forgiven thee.'

Resurrection means that we live under the

## THE DEAD ARE RAISED

sovereignty of God's purpose and will. We no longer halt between this opinion and that; we no longer carefully balance the various claims which life makes upon us, seeking to do justice to them all ; we no longer strive after the perfect compromise, the *via media*, between God and mammon ; we no longer attempt to bring into one coherent scheme the many purposes which we count worthy of our following ; we do none of these things, because the word of new life is a word of guidance, which makes an absolute claim in the name of God's purpose and God's will. The new life is a life under authority, the authority of the calling of God, ' I will go before you into Galilee.'

Resurrection means that we live under the sovereignty of God's power. We no longer shrink from the tasks God lays upon us, because of our weakness to carry them out ; we no longer seek for a way out of the trials, the difficulties, and the disappointments which life lays upon us ; we do not hesitate in fear before taking each fresh step into the future ; we do not set a hedge about our lives to protect them from the strangeness of



## TELL JOHN

new experiences ; we are no longer crippled by these restraints and weaknesses, because already we are sharers in God's triumph over them, so that ' in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.'

A small group of friends were gathered together to seek the guidance of God. When, on the third day, their discussions came to a standstill, it was agreed that they should kneel together for ten minutes in silent prayer, and at the end of that time, if any wished to do so, he should speak what was in his heart. There was one, whose wife was threatened with a serious disease, which meant months of difficulty and anxiety for her and him. As he knelt among his friends, the image of his wife rose before his mind, and his heart went out to her in a prayer of tender longing. Clearly and spontaneously came the knowledge, transforming in its power, that the woman he so dearly loved was yet more dearly loved by God. That conviction, newly realised, brought an assurance and a peace which lifted him on to a new plane of being, where the barriers of fear

## *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

were broken down, and God's ' All's well ' rang triumphantly in his ears.

Resurrection means that we live under the sovereignty of God's freedom. We no longer think and act under the bondage of a fear which robs both thinking and acting of all spontaneity ; we no longer mutilate our lives in the vain effort to fit our thoughts into a complete and consistent system, and our actions into a complete and consistent code of conduct. We have learnt the wisdom of the Preacher, that ' there is a time to every purpose under the heaven . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh . . . a time to love, and a time to hate . . . a time for war, and a time for peace.' Sharing in the freedom which is from God, we shall not feel a moral shock at the Preacher's further exhortation : ' Be not righteous over much ; neither make thyself over wise : why shouldest thou destroy thyself ? Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish : why shouldest thou die before thy time ? It is good that thou shouldest take hold of this ; yea, also from that withdraw not thine hand : for he that feareth God shall come forth of them all.' We shall not

## TELL JOHN

pour scorn upon his wisdom, because we know that it is those who have submitted to the fear of God, who enter into the perfect liberty of His children. We are no longer crushed under the weight that the law lays upon us, whether it be the law of conduct, or the law of thought (for the law still remains, though we are not under the law), because now we serve as sons who have complete confidence in the purposes of God, and not as slaves who know not what their masters do. We no longer sow sparsely and in undue haste, being over anxious as to the results of our labours, but we sow in ample generosity, knowing that it is God that giveth the increase. When in our hour of need we seek the smallest place in God's household, asking that we may have the portion of a slave, we find that God has called us into the fellowship of his freeborn children : ' Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet . . . for this my son was dead, and is alive again.'

The desire for life is the seed of the desire for God. Of this seed, as of all seeds, it is true that ' except it fall into the earth and

180

## *THE DEAD ARE RAISED*

die, it abideth by itself alone.' For between us and God there is a gulf which we cannot bridge. The forces of sin and death rob us of the fulfilment of our desire. We seek to justify our life, and we find that the verdict of ' guilty ' goes forth against every attempt to do so. We seek to harness our life to the dominant purpose of our choice, and we find that we stand halting between two opinions. We seek to strengthen both will and hand to the task of overcoming the evil in us and about us, and we find ourselves in despair in the face of our weakness and our impotency. We seek the freedom of a life which shall be spontaneous in its growth and action, and we find we cannot escape from the cares and lusts that twine themselves around our life, and hold us in thralldom to themselves. Then to us in the midst of our failure, our perplexity, our weakness, and our servitude, there comes the last great promise of the Gospel, ' I am the resurrection and the life,' bringing the assurance of a glory which more than banishes despair, and of a fulfilment which surpasses all desire. The stone which lies at the tomb of our life is rolled away, and the light of

## *TELL JOHN*

God's new day breaks in upon the darkness within ; the voice of God calls us and claims us for Himself, bidding us come forth into the world, where all things are made new, where God reigns in forgiving love and almighty power, and where we are loosed from the bands of death for the perfect freedom of His service.

VIII

*GOOD TIDINGS*

*‘ Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.’*

*‘ I am the light of the world ; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’*

*‘ Go and tell John ; . . . the poor have the Gospel preached to them.’*



## CHAPTER VIII

### *GOOD TIDINGS*

‘ I AM the light of the world ; he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ The words break in upon the arguments of the Pharisees. Opinion was divided : some said a prophet, others the Messiah ; one party quoted the authority of Scripture, another interpreted the passage differently. The onlooker found it difficult to make up his mind when the experts did not agree : he changed from one opinion to another, until he dropped the question altogether, and went about his own business ; the matter was evidently beyond him and best left to those whose professional concern it was.

Into this world of disputation and doubt, where argument was met by argument, and proof was added to proof, there broke the voice of the Christ. The words came as a



## TELL JOHN

bare statement, the assertion of a fact, bringing a promise and a challenge.

Thus it is that the good news is spoken by God to man. It is spoken out into the world, where men are busy with their arguments and proofs : it is heard only in the heart of the individual, who is waiting in expectancy and faith. To one who is desolate, deprived of all that he holds most dear in life, the good news comes as a word of comfort which draws the sting from his sorrow. To another who finds himself in a far country, carried away by the burning desire to enjoy his portion of the human heritage, the good news comes bringing the joyful recognition of home, and annihilating in a moment the great distance that separates him from what he now knows to be his rightful place. To a nation in exile it comes, whispering to their hearts the longed for ' at last,' raising them up one by one, until the whisper has grown into a clarion call, bidding them go forth and return to their own land. To the man who cannot break the bonds of the sin which robs him of his life, the good news comes as a word of forgiveness, which stills the turmoil of his

## GOOD TIDINGS

unavailing struggle, giving him a strength not his own. To those who have lost their way, and in their loneliness have felt the horror of a dark despair, it comes as a word of hope, which shines as a kindly light upon their path.

Thus it is that the divine blessing is given to man. The word is spoken to the heart of the individual, neither proving itself, nor arguing. Always it is the bare word of promise, which can only take root in him who is expectant : it is the word of invitation, ‘ Come, for all things are now ready.’

There are no limits to the ways in which God speaks His word of promise : it travels freely as the wind. We may hear it in the break of the waves on the shore, or in the laughter of the child that plays at our side, or in the face of the woman who lies on her bed in silent suffering.

On a cliff high up above the sea, where stood an old and ugly seat, there came one who sat down to listen to the sound of the surf on the rocks below, and to watch the golden glory of the dying day. As he sat there, musing on the failure of the Church to

## TELL JOHN

be a glad company of hardy adventurers, such as it had been in the days of its infancy, and wondering whether it was not better to break free from a service which seemed to rob life of its richness rather than bring to it greater joy and glory, there came an old man, walking slowly up the hill, who paused to rest beside him, and share with him the evening light and air. They passed the time of day, they spoke of ships and storms at sea, and then, with that ease which comes naturally when men are no longer confined within four walls, they passed on to deeper things, and talked of men, and life, and death. Together they watched the fading light, until the dusk had fallen, and then the old man said good night and passed down the path to his home. The other's thoughts reverted to his previous reflections, and then for a moment the veil was lifted, as his eyes rested on that old and ugly seat, which had seemed to spoil the wild beauty of the place. Yet it had been the means whereby one life had reached out to another, creating something new, which had not been before.

We may recall the mad millionaire in Dr.

## GOOD TIDINGS

Jacks' story, who was first awakened to the wonder and beauty of life by the sight of a mouse moving in the corner of his sickroom, as he lay there not far from death. He had of course often seen a mouse before, but he had never seen one as he saw it now. It was transfigured before him, so that he perceived it in the perfect beauty of its own completeness. From that moment the world became a different place for him : not only was he restored to health, but he found that he had a zest for trivial everyday experiences such as he had never known before.

We may remember too, though we forget it again, how some saying of Jesus has pierced the sluggishness of our understanding, and stopped the slow drift of an aimless life as a rock in the desert stops the drifting sand.

In each case what happens is essentially the same. The good news has that transfiguring power which makes all things new : wherever it is heard there is a new creation. It is this for which we are waiting. At first it tells us nothing of our destiny, or of our hopes for the welfare of the race, or of the progress of our purposes great or small : it

## TELL JOHN

speaks only of God. The living God makes Himself known : all our previous knowledge is taken up in this other knowledge, which alone is able to satisfy and silence the questionings of our doubting lives.

The good news is the freely spoken word of the living God : always it is God's word, not ours. If we seek it directly we shall not find it ; it will elude us like a timid bird which flies away at each approach. We cannot command the word of promise ; this do the churches of the world seek after : we can only believe. That is why expectant watching is one of the few essential qualities that Jesus did demand of His disciples. It is part of the divine claim upon man's allegiance that he shall be prepared to hear and feel and see nothing through long night watches, and yet grow neither impatient nor weary in waiting for the dawn. It is the poor who have good tidings preached to them. John, in prison, would understand. He knew that it was the poor, the ungodly and the outcasts who had listened to him and heard his message of expectation. They had laid up no treasure for themselves upon earth,

190

## GOOD TIDINGS

and their hearts were open for the divine word of comfort and hope : in them the ground was ready for the sowing of the seed of faith ; they would *believe*.

So it came at last to happen to Peter, when he was prepared to put aside all trust in his own loyalty and to cast himself upon the faithfulness of God, ‘ Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love Thee.’ There is no other way than this by which we may arrive at the truth of the Easter message. In its deepest meaning the Resurrection is neither historic fact nor religious experience. So long as we are moving in a plane where we are looking for a tomb which was empty or was not empty, we cannot hear the good news of Easter ; so long as we are thinking in terms of the subjective or objective nature of religious experience, we cannot hear the good news of Easter. In both cases we are still of that adulterous and sinful generation which seeketh after a sign. Like every other word of God, the Resurrection is either self-authenticating or it is not the word of God. The divine ‘ I am ’ is the only form in which God reveals Himself. It is this, and this

## TELL JOHN

alone, transfiguring the dark shadow of the Cross, which is the truth of the Easter message. Once heard we are free to obey or to reject the word of promise, but we cannot turn this liberty into a power to control the word itself.

God leads us on until we are ready to hear the word of promise. Then He speaks, and in speaking calls us to the crisis of decision. 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee.' Thus it is that God makes Himself known. The word of promise is a word of command, which can only be answered by the obedience of faith. To obey means that we cut ourselves off from the familiar landmarks that have been our guide-posts hitherto, and take a step in the dark. Men shrink from the real calling of God, for it is not like some human aspiration of our choosing, which may be taken up and put down as we think fit : it is the power of the divine spirit threatening to carry us we know not whither.

Our first desire is to escape. Perhaps we deny the truth of the very word of promise

## GOOD TIDINGS

itself : ' Thou bearest witness of thyself, thy witness is not true.' We can, like the Pharisees, when confronted with the Christ, resolutely shut our ears to the hearing of the word, and so in the end become like the stony ground in which the seed can find no permanent root. Perhaps we compromise. Surely, we argue with ourselves, the good things with which we are familiar, though they are old and passing away, yet have some claim upon us. The answer of Jesus is not comforting : ' Let the dead bury their dead.' Perhaps, in more worthy fashion, we have counted the cost and know that we have neither the strength nor the will for such a task. It is true : even so the word of promise beats more insistently upon our ears, ' Say not, I am a child : for to whomsoever I shall send thee thou shalt go.'

To obey means that we acknowledge the sovereignty of God : by faith we enter a new world of which God is the only centre. In that new world He claims the whole of our life ; we can no longer be satisfied by the offering of our sacrifices of worship and service, because He demands more than any



## TELL JOHN

gift which we can *bring* ; He claims ourselves. We can no longer rejoice in our choice of Him, as we may have done in the days of our religious arrogance, because we are face to face with the altogether different situation where He has chosen us. We can only go forward now as His servants, in His world, for His purposes. When we are young we gird ourselves and walk whither we like, but when we are born again another girds us and carries us whither we would not.

To disobey means that we deny the voice of the living God. This is what the Bible and Christianity mean by sin. It is only against this background that we begin to understand the meaning of sin. It is not to be wondered at that the word sounds strange to our modern ears : the reason for this strangeness is not that we have outgrown the narrow views of our forefathers, and know so much more than they did, but rather that we have long been deaf to the voice of the living God. When God makes Himself known then we begin to understand that we are sinners : sin is disobedience to the voice of the living God.

The obedience of faith gives to our life a ,

## *GOOD TIDINGS*

new centre, a new motive, and a new strength. Once more we echo the experience of Peter : ' Master, we toiled all night and took nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the nets.' In that ' nevertheless at thy word I will . . .' faith comes to life in us. Into the darkness of human failure, weakness, and sin, there has broken the voice of God bidding us launch out into the deep. We have tried too often to wish to begin all over again : we cannot start out now with the flags flying and the bands playing as we did in the days of our first enthusiasm for the service of God. We know the bitterness, not only of failure, but of impotency.

' Ten thousand times I've done my best and all's to do again.' We have no zest for a struggle in which we know the chances are all against us. God brings us to the depths of self-despair, in order that He may call us, in our hopelessness and our helplessness, to do, at His command, that very thing which we cannot do of our own will. Only in faith can we obey, a faith which rests upon the faithfulness of God, ' nevertheless at thy word . . . '

## TELL JOHN

Through faith come the humility and strength of those who labour, knowing that they are unprofitable servants, and yet also knowing that God will use their service for His own purpose. Through faith is born that serenity and detachment which alone can carry a man through the Scylla and Charybdis of the fear of human censure on the one hand and the love of human praise on the other. Through faith comes the will to meet defeat and failure, knowing that in God's hands these bring their own reward. Through faith alone can we come to learn that *all things* work together for good to them that love God.

A new centre to life's movement, a new motive, a new strength, these are the fruits of the faith which receives the good news: but a new *home* faith does not bring. The continual call of God day by day, through each concrete situation of our ordinary lives, and the continual crisis of decision in which we must face each summons, teach us that we are in a land not our own. At length we learn not to seek to build a house there, or to set up a monument to our faith. To do so is to turn

196

## *GOOD TIDINGS*

back from the calling of God. Gradually our eyes are turned towards that invisible city, our true home, whose builder and maker is God. The good news for ever points us forward on the road of faith, giving to us, like the sign-posts on an unfamiliar path, the guidance that we need for the present and a great hope for the future. No longer do we walk in darkness, for we have the light of life.



IX

THE KINGDOM

*‘ The Kingdom of God is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his own garden ; and it grew and became a tree ; and the birds of the heaven lodged in the branches thereof.’*

*‘ The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls ; and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.’*

*‘ Neither shall they say, Lo here ! or, Lo there ! for lo, the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.’*



## CHAPTER IX

### *THE KINGDOM*

THE Kingdom of God ! The phrase involves the unquestioning recognition that God is ! It involves the recognition that God is Sovereign, Lord, Creator, King. It does not suggest that God is a merely amiable parent. To Jesus God is Father ; yet when Jesus turns to speak of God in relation to mankind, He has very much more to say of a Kingdom than of a family. God is Love, yes, but God is Lord and King of Love.

Belief in the Kingdom of God involves the unquestioning acceptance, that God reveals. God is not an absentee, reigning in lonely isolation. God is Lord of men, and as such makes known His purposes to men. He assumes initiative, enters the world, and speaks His Word through Jesus of Nazareth. He speaks again in the present in lowly form, through the stranger who lies in need at our



## TELL JOHN

gates. Often we do not hear His Word. Often we vex ourselves with the human problem, how we can amid our doubts discover the clear, authoritative Word of God? We take some question of our choosing, affecting our future plans, and ask for the divine decision ; and in the silence of eternity there is no reply. Still more often, however, it is God who questions us, and we who are silent. God calls us day by day, it may be to break some cherished habit, it may be to perform some act of unrewarded kindness. If we are not faithful in that which is least, it ill becomes us to wonder, when God is silent at our suggestion that He shall appoint us to rule over many cities.

Belief in the Kingdom of God involves unquestioning allegiance to the requests of the King. Life in the Kingdom is a life lived under orders. All human desires must be wholly subordinate to the one desire, that the name of God may be hallowed, and His Will be done. Every human hope and ambition must be subordinate to the purpose of God. The pearl is indeed of great price ; those who light upon it are filled with joy ; it may not

## *THE KINGDOM*

however, be added to our collection, as though one other human desire amongst others were now satisfied ; he who would buy the pearl must sell all.

The message of the Kingdom of God is not at first sight a comforting or comfortable message. The price is high ! It is not, moreover, a question of a little less or a little more. There is no place for bargaining. The price is infinite and absolute. Whatever our wealth of worldly desire and worldly pleasures, the demand that is made is Naught or All !

Naturally, all men refuse to pay that price. Some men adopt the course of denying that there be a God who reigns. At first the reality of the inward call of God on their allegiance must be denied. This is not difficult. God, though He is King, is courteous in love. He does not force men to accept His presence. He knocks, but waits until a door be opened, to speak more fully. He speaks, but speaks in gentle terms. The loud voice of man can soon out-shout the Word of God. As men discover that they are permitted to argue the reality of God out of existence, they

## TELL JOHN

become more brazen in denial. Soon they themselves become convinced by the arguments which they have repeated. Thus there arises in human society a class of sincere pagans. They are generally pleasant people. They at least have the merit of honesty. Because of their honesty, they are also the least harmful of the rebels against God.

Other men adopt the course of turning the reality of the Word of God into a hypothesis. They acknowledge at least the possibility of divine government ; but they incorporate a ' perhaps ' and an ' if ' into their acknowledgment. The method is ingenious. It enables us to preserve an outward form of interest in God. It enables us to appear before men (and before God if there be a God !) as genuine seekers after truth. At the same time it does not require from us any unpleasant submission to the authority of God, but enables us to preserve our autonomy. Moreover, the divine hypothesis, while providing a very interesting field of speculation for our leisure moments, need not interfere very seriously with the serious business of life. Always for a little longer the great ' Perhaps '

## *THE KINGDOM*

may be suffered to remain an unanswered question, while we go our way, lord for the moment of our own lives. This is the method of much theological theorising. It is very much more dangerous than an honest paganism. It involves a refusal to decide, and to commit ourselves on the one major question of life, and from this refusal there follows a drifting aimlessness with regard to the whole conduct of life.

Thirdly, and on the whole more commonly, we turn God into a formality. The insistent reality of God cannot be met with denial. We therefore cry 'Lord ! Lord !' and think by the loudness of our cry to do Him honour, while at the same time we turn away from His commands. We attend churches ; we organise more and yet more religious societies ; we excel in those good works which demand from us a satisfactory measure of self-sacrifice, but which do not require the absolute gift of all. We seek with our religious activities to silence the demands of God. We do not heed the divine Halt to our fever of good works. We therefore do not hear the divine Forward to the one absolute divine

## TELL JOHN

work, which would demand from us that wholehearted trust which we are not prepared to give. This is the method of the religious in escaping from the Sovereignty of God. It is by far the most dangerous form of rebellion against God. For those who fall into it it involves hypocrisy, and a perpetual lie in the soul. Worse still, as a result of the hypocrisy the Kingdom is hidden from others who would seek for it. Loyalty to God is represented in the world by an outward profession of religious language, and an outward attendance at religious ceremony. The very name of God is taken in vain, and those who hear in secret His calling are driven to the slow and painful process of finding some other name by which to honour Him.

To be religious need not of course always mean that men honour God with their lips, while in their lives they disobey His will, or perhaps no longer even know what it means to listen to His will. This is, however, the peril which constantly lies but a hair's-breadth removed from true religion ; and it is so fatal in its consequences, that those who come nearest to understanding the meaning of the

## *THE KINGDOM*

Kingdom will be constantly vigilant, and constantly fierce in denunciation. This is why the anger of Christ is directed not against a pagan world but against the religious leaders of His day. 'They enter not into the Kingdom, themselves, and those that are entering they hinder.' 'They compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and having found him they make him two-fold more the son of hell than themselves.' For the same reason the Church which understands the mind of its Master will be tender towards the honest paganism of the world outside, but will be fierce in self-criticism, lest with all its utmost outward forms and words at heart it be itself in rebellion against the Word of the living God. To-day the language of religion through long years of misuse has become like a debased currency, having the proper outward form but lacking the true intrinsic value. By many who think to serve God, the name of God is taken in vain ; to many who seek to serve God, the word God has come to stand for idols which they cannot serve. A fierce attack on all false idolatrous gods is needed. A fierce attack is needed on the

## TELL JOHN

idolatrous religion, which honours the dead gods of men's choosing, but which will not submit to being called and chosen by the Living God. To-day, as in every day, religion must be attacked in the name of religion ; the comfortable worship of easy idols must cease, that the Living God may reign.

God is real. In obedience to His self-revelation of His purpose, and in that alone, human life finds its significance and its reality. Where God is denied, and where hypothetical or dead gods are worshipped in His place, there human life is unreal. It has fallen away from that which gives it its true significance. It is in the strict sense non-sensical. Sometimes humanity is so wholly fallen from God, that men no longer know even that they are fallen. They become complacent with their estrangement, not knowing that from which they are estranged. They set up a new system of human values to guide their lives ; perhaps they proceed in time to build human temples to hold their human gods. They no longer recognise that life has another and a different meaning. They no longer know that ahead of them, out

208

## THE KINGDOM

of their sight, there is a wholly different life, a life of infinite absolute cost and of infinite absolute joy. For a moment the complacency may be shaken. A sudden death, the disasters of war, long years of trade depression, the sharp pang of awareness before a setting sun, these or other things may call man to acknowledge, not perhaps that there is for life a new meaning with God, but at least that there is no meaning in life without God. For a moment we are called to recognise that our self-centred lives are nonsensical, and that the sense of life lies hid with Christ in God. But the moment passes. We dare not respond by selling all. We preserve our mastery over ourselves, and over our gods. We settle down again to the comfortable routine of our self-centred lives, and find what sense and what pleasure we can amid their follies. We forget whether so much there be a pearl of great price, and contentedly enlarge our collection of lesser pearls.

At this point we may understand why in its origin Christianity is the religion of the Cross, and why to-day it must remain the religion of the Cross. There the contradiction is once



## TELL JOHN

for all manifest of the life in complete obedience to God, and the life, not least the religious life, without God. God's sense is man's nonsense ; man's sense is God's nonsense. Man has established for himself on earth a firm and settled republic, with all the proper affairs of life, including a respectable cult of the gods, properly managed and controlled. In this world the Kingdom of God must then appear as folly. God reigns ; but He can only reign, alone, despised and crucified.

Ideally the first commandment of the love of man for God leads on inevitably to the love of man for man. It leads to love in the lower sense of service. The neighbour whom God sets at my side is loved by Him ; I, if I love God, shall love those whom He loves ; I in my love for God shall show that love by service of my neighbour. The first commandment also leads on to and conditions the second, in the deeper truer sense of intimate fellowship. Where men alike listen to the call of God, and seek to hear and obey that call, there the spirit of man meets the spirit of man at the hidden point of union. The fellowship

## *THE KINGDOM*

of man is rooted and grounded in the love of the One God. This fellowship is the true meaning of the Church, as the community of those who are called by God. Moreover, the fellowship of man with man in turn enables man the more loyally to love God. The second commandment leads back to the first. To live in intimate fellowship with others who are called is to find one's own trust of the calling of God strengthened, and to find it the easier to be loyal to the calling.

The first commandment conditions the second ; where the first is denied there will be no full and final fulfilment of the second. There may be amongst men mutual service ; there may be companionship on the level of work and of play ; there can be no abiding fellowship, since there is no grounding of the fellowship in that which abides. There is no abiding fellowship amongst thieves, as is sufficiently evident when they are no longer united in their common adventure, but come to divide the spoil. There can be no real fellowship where the religious and the moral have ceased to wait on the living God, and where ethics has become an acquisitive

## TELL JOHN

search for virtue, and religion an acquisitive search for religious experiences. Where this has happened, in loyalty to God, and in the ultimate interest of love amongst men, the Christ must arm Himself with a scourge, and drive out the thieves from the house of prayer. To ignore the first absolute claim of the first commandment, and to turn Christianity into an immediate human ethic of 'Let's be happy and loving all round,' is to cry 'Peace ! Peace !' where as yet there is and can be no peace.

The world in which we actually live has revolted against the love of God. Now through pride and now through fear men hide from the living Word of God. To enjoy life to the utmost while and as one may is the accepted rule of life, explicit in normal conversation, and often enough implicit as the guiding rule in the greater part of our actions. We do not commonly assume in talking to our neighbours that the one desire to give glory to God is the dominating motive of every choice and every action ; and we should soon be disillusioned if we did. Lacking the condition of the love of God, we do not find

## *THE KINGDOM*

between man and man the intimate fellowship which agrees as common principle to set this first commandment over every thought and every action. Those who love God will long as children of God for this deeper fellowship with man. They will not for one instant suppose that their religion is such as to place them in an enclosed temple, where they need not care for the poor at their gates, nor on a pedestal where they may feel superior to the poor at their gates. They will know rather that they are all unworthy of the calling of God, and that in their sin they are one with all mankind. Nevertheless, though they may have nothing of the proud exclusiveness of religious complacency, they will have much of the desolating exclusiveness of religious loneliness. They will find that their love for God can find expression only in the lower love of the service of their fellow-men, not in the higher love of an intimate religious fellowship with their fellow-men.

This is the most tragic paradox in the many paradoxes of a fallen world. The second commandment ought to follow from the first; if we interpret it to mean, as it should, an

## TELL JOHN

intimate fellowship based on agreement of fundamental purpose, then we shall find that it is in fact at war with the first. If we would agree in purpose with our fellow-men, we shall all too often find that we are agreeing in disloyalty to the calling of God ; if we would be loyal to God, we shall all too often find that it leads us to shame and scorn, and to ultimate isolation from our fellow-men. The paradox is deep in the teaching and the life of Christ ; until the world has learnt far more fully than at present His teaching of the Kingdom, the paradox will remain deep in the life of His followers. The Kingdom is a kingdom of peace and good will amongst men ; nevertheless the Son of Man comes, bringing not peace but a sword, and only with the cutting sword of the Word of God is peace to be won. The King cometh, meek and riding on an ass ; in the morning Jesus cleansed with fierce rebuke the robbers' den to which he came. God is Father and His love for men is reflected in the love of the human family ; nevertheless the first effect of the calling of God is to set son at war with father, and husband at war with wife. Ideally

## *THE KINGDOM*

it follows from the love of men for the one God, that men are united in one family as children of God ; in actual fact we shall find that loyalty to God in the present human society will all too often lead us to an unbearable individual loneliness. The Christ proclaims the love of the Father for His family, and lives with this love in His heart ; the Christ dies, with a cry of desolation, His last remaining companions two thieves, one of whom reviles Him. The Christ sends forth His disciples to proclaim a kingdom whose law is love ; He promises His disciples that in their work they shall be hated of all men for His name's sake.

There is no solution of this paradox. The individual or the Church or the nation which seeks to avoid the cost of the Cross thereby forfeits the joy of the Kingdom. There is no direct short cut to good will amongst men. The love of man, which ultimately will follow from the love of God, is nevertheless the last tragic price which must be paid, before the pearl of great price is purchased and the God of Love reigns. There must first be the love of God, at whatever cost ; and only so will

## TELL JOHN

the full measure of love amongst men ultimately be won.

The urgent task which lies before us this day is to find again the pearl of great price, the seed which shall grow into a mighty tree wherein the birds of the heavens may shelter. We need to be brought through the paradox of the Cross to recognise that we have not at present got that one pearl amid the many pearls which we collect and treasure. We need to recognise that we do not at present as a society hear the Word of God. We must become importunate in our discontent and our search, until we find the Kingdom. We must rather become still amid the furious forward rush of human works, until we listen and hear where the Word of God is spoken, claiming allegiance. We need to open our eyes that we may behold where in fact amid the follies of human thought and practice God is now Sovereign and Lord.

The urgent call which comes to us to-day is that having heard the commands of the King, those commands shall be obeyed. We are bidden not deny the calling of God, and not put a monstrous 'Perhaps' before the

## *THE KINGDOM*

calling of God, and most of all not escape by a loud-voiced cry of ' Lord, Lord ! ' before the calling of God. The allegiance to which we are called involves the complete reversal of our lives. What before was sense will be nonsense, and what before was nonsense will be sense. Every human desire must be squandered lavishly in payment of the price.

Then there will come in allegiance to God a joy outweighing all loss. There is the joy of the presence of the living God. There is the joy of the divine favour. There is the joy, first of service, ultimately of fellowship with man. There is the joy when life finds its true meaning, in the escape from all relativism, and the response to a task commanded with authority. There is the joy of the confidence and power, when in the service of God power is given to achieve tasks impossible with man. The Kingdom involves to the last obedience, but it is no longer the unwilling obedience to an alien law ; it is the spontaneous response to that which we now recognise as the true meaning and the true joy of life. In the service of the King we are for the first time free. We offer ourselves as



## TELL JOHN

hired servants and find that we are greeted as sons.

Out to this day in which we live there goes the message of John the Baptist, repent, expect, believe. It is a message calling us to escape from the false security of man-made gods, to refuse to deify man as he is, to feel deep in our hearts the urgent need of the gift of vision and of power from God. All too easily the costless holding by the mind of a few clear-cut theological ideas takes the place of selling all in trust in the living God ; the mechanical performance of the ritual of worship takes the place of the true adoration of God ; the elaborate organisation of a purely human religious society takes the place of the true Church, which is the communion of those called by God. All forms of religion, which lie within the power of man apart from the action of God, must be washed away with the baptism with water. There must come that sense of impotence and of the need of forgiveness, which is the furthest possibility of human religion. There must come, born out of the dissatisfaction of man with himself, a great expect-

## *THE KINGDOM*

tancy that God from His side will speak and act in the world, and will do for men that which men cannot do for themselves. There must come, born out of urgent need, faith, the willingness to trust the Divine Personality beyond all human personality, and the willingness to obey the Divine Will that is set over against every human will.

The message of John comes, preparing a highway in a desert land, over which God may pass to claim His Kingdom. Following on the baptism of John there comes, when and how God wills, from His Grace and in His gift, the baptism with the Spirit. Certainly we shall not rest content with a religion which leaves man merely lamenting his insufficiency, and which leaves God wholly transcendent. Certainly however also we shall not if we are wise suppose too quickly that we already possess and can hold and distribute the Spirit of God. We shall be very suspicious of a Christianity which thinks to supersede the Johannine call to penitence, when Christ Himself repeated the Johannine call to penitence. At all costs we shall avoid using the name of the Holy

## TELL JOHN

Spirit for activities which lie wholly within the natural powers of men, and which are very far from holy. Only when we have heard and taken deeply to ourselves the message of John is a way prepared in our hearts for the coming of the Spirit of God.

Where the way is prepared there will then come in an hour which we know not, and in a way which we cannot foretell, the baptism with the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit will cleanse and purify our minds that we may receive the Word of God. Those who have ceased to listen to the self-revelation of God, and those whose ears through long disuse have lost the power of hearing, shall find that once more they hear. Those who see the visionless world of material things but are blind to that other world of vision shall have their eyes touched by the healing finger of God, and shall behold His glory and His power. Those who have never yet truly lived shall come to themselves and shall know the death of their present lives ; they will, however, no longer seek to escape from life, for the lives which they are already living will be transformed by the coming of

## *THE KINGDOM*

the life-giving Spirit. The gift of the Spirit will be a gift of boldness and of confidence, as from day to day we receive our commission from God, and as we know like the Roman Centurion that He who calls us to His service has the power to achieve in us and through us whatever He commands. Chief of the gifts of the Spirit there will come love, where the self-seeking pride of man is broken, and where men come to find the one abiding basis of fellowship with one another, in response to the Love of God.



PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
BY ROBERT MACLEHOSE AND CO. LTD.  
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, GLASGOW







UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY



141 401

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY

